

Spatial Temporal Factors in Luo Traditional Religion: A Case Study of the Luo Homestead

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“Science and art are curiously connected. Each inspires the other; together they describe human experience. Both are shaped by common principle: the human mind seeks order and is only satisfied as it wrests design from complexity or apparent chaos.”(Phillips, Filles, & Cohen, 1979).

Abstract

This paper investigates how the Luo of Kenya make homes according to time, space and the general topography of the landscape. These are the factors that determine the orientation and the alignment of the homestead which in turn are influenced by gravitational forces of nature. The location of the houses depends on a fixed pattern aligned to the cosmic dichotomy. The spatial and temporal order is controlled by nature and folklore taboos. For example, if one contravenes the sanctioned order and pattern, the family would be afflicted by incurable diseases that can only be remedied by correcting the disorder and realigning the structures. When such corrective measures are taken, they involve sacred objects and religious rituals that are conducted on sacred spots of the homestead at specific times. The study investigates the intersection between time, and space and how it resonates with Luo Cultural heritage. It would appear that the Luo home is adapting to fundamental physical laws that govern matter, space and time. The paper discusses how the Luo belief system makes them conform to a scheme controlled by the Solar system. And on this basis, the paper examines the Luo home as a temple in which peace is brought about by divination and land tenure is subjected to a formatted blue print that must remain constant. The study has been carried out by fieldwork survey and observation together with interviews and Focus Group Discussion. There was also library research to help with theorization, interpretation and analysis.

Keywords: *Folklore Taboos, Luo Belief System, Luo Cultural Heritage, Religious Rituals, Sacred Objects.*

1. Introduction

The Luo people live around the Lake Victoria region. According to Ogot, (1967)

and Ayot (1976), they originally lived in Sudan. Some folklore indicate that they were the inhabitants of Egypt when the pyramids were constructed. Today the Luo are found in Uganda along river Nile, and in Kenya around the Lake Victoria and some of them are found in Tanzania around Mwanza and Mara region. For a long time, the Luo were pastoralists, but have since evolved out of this occupation and become fisherfolk instead. As the fish stock in the lake have dwindled because of overfishing and pollution, the Luo have gradually taken to crop farming. It appears that rivers, valleys, and lakes have played a significant role in their migration routes and settlements. This is why they are known as Nilotics, named after the Nile river, and they are also called *jonam* meaning people of the lake. Their other sub tribes that live in Uganda and Sudan are known as the Padhola, Dinka, Acholi and Nuer.

2. The Luo Homestead

The Luo people construct their homestead according to a design and pattern received from their ancestors from time immemorial. It is mandatory that the gate of the home faces a water body such as a lake, a river or a pond. This plan ensures that the runoff water flows away from the home and does not enter houses. But that is not all, Ogembo (2005) learnt that the houses of younger family members are put up in descending order, towards the gate. This way, the younger you are the nearer you should be towards the gate. There is a strict interplay between the temporal and the spatial factors. If there is a good balance of space and time use, the outcome is health for all the inhabitants of this home. However, if the blue print of the home is not followed, the Luo believe that the consequence is a long chronic illness called *chira*. To some extent, Blunt and Varley (2004) agree with them on the concept of the home as a space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear. The home is a cultural space, which expresses relations between material architecture, the people and the world. When a family member is afflicted by an unknown illness among the Luo, the first place and space to be examined is the home pattern. In many cases, the medicine man would discover discordant or incongruent building patterns or a noncompliant timing in which a junior brother put up a cottage known as *simba* before his senior brother. In this kind of situation, the medicine man would offer medicine known as *manyasi*, then reorganize the structure, Mboya (1978) describes the Luo homestead almost as a worship place or

a temple, where ‘holiness is observed’ according to the cultural heritage received. Dependent on gradient of the landscape, the runoff water distributes the settlement pattern. The older people pitch their homes at the highest altitude, then the rest follow in a systematic descending order to the youngest person or couple. This is not unique among the Luos because in many ethnic communities, several factors determine settlements patterns and the way they are designed. It is common to consider things like the relief, climate, vegetation and political orientation including socio-economic, historical and mythical beliefs over their origin.

3. Religion

If we take religion to mean a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially. When considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually. Involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code for the conduct of human affairs, as the Webster Dictionary describes it, the Luo homestead is indeed a worship place. According to Gottlieb and Mbiti (1996) the African environment and nature are infused in every aspect of traditional religions and culture. They show that cosmology and beliefs are intricately intertwined with the natural phenomena and environment. The things such as weather, thunder, lightning, rain, day, moon, sun, stars, and so on are subject to control of African people and in turn, they also rule the human affairs. This belief reinforces the Luo tradition that demand strict observation of environmental dynamics and synchrony with confluent points. When all the natural factors are united, then there is harmony and peace. However, if they are off tune and the people fall sick, then the environment, like the homestead, must be examined to figure out the adverse effects that might be emanating from the structural dislocation.

4. Science

Merriam Webster defines science as the knowledge about or study of the natural world based on facts learned through experiments and observation. In conformity to this principle, the Luo resonate to the water bodies and their flows to settle on the landscape, fitting in the scheme of their observation. It is arguable that these people’s taboo system is dependent a scientific phenomenon which they may not

comprehend fully, but in which they base their faith for health and illness. Such scientific phenomena include the gravity that control and sustain waterflow. In fact, Miffin (2002) states that all surface water is trying to reach sea level due to gravity. It is also said that water will find its own level, thereby avoiding the resistant points, preferring the point of the least resistance and no obstruction. It is even speculated that the flow of water is not only caused by landscape and topography, but also the rotation of the earth. However, Rydell (1997) thinks that what determines the direction of river flow is elevation, topography and gravity. It is these scientific principles that determine the rituals of healing or simple prior conformity to avoid calamities and tragedies. It will be later seen how the Luo heritage is suffused and blended to these scientific concepts and so there are no conflicts and antagonism between the two.

5. Luo Ritual on Space and Time

The home provides a unique arena or platform on which the ‘worship’ rituals are undertaken or performed. The architecture of the houses must observe certain permanent shapes, sizes, sequence, and orientation. To have peace, health and prosperity for the family, the location of the houses must follow a given spatial-temporal order and position. This is a strict cultural pattern, which can only be defied at the cost of long and chronic illness called *chira*. Mboya (1978) made a passionate plea with Luo to keep their traditions in order not to get infected by this deadly disease that is very difficult to treat. He justifies the ritualization of the spaces in the homestead on this basis alone. The traditional homestead had a euphorbia round fence all around it and all houses were circular. In terms of geometry, the circle was easier to draw in perfect form and to keep that way. Before the other geometrical patterns were discovered probably the Luo knew only of this shape. The circle dominated their art, painting and creativity. As expected, there were gates on the fences for purposes of going in and out. For security, the gates were closed at night to keep intruders out and to make sure that those inside were safe. The fence was a liminal sketch marking the threshold which was significant in terms of indicating those who were insiders from those that are outsiders.

Putting up a gate was not just a physical exercise that one simply woke up one day

and established. One's father must have put up his own as a prerequisite. Other than that, the father must come and identify the spot and bless it, if the home were going to be prosperous. Again, the gate, being the spot of transition or an in between position, define the insiders against outsiders, and for this reason, it is a highly contested space. The antagonism between the outsiders and insiders are settled here at the gate. Sometimes the contest is physical, involving material things like cattle or property, being subject of robbery. But in many other cases, it is the most subtle and vulnerable space, where the wicked neighbour would plant the charms of witchcraft to harm the residents as they come and go. Therefore, as the gates are constructed, it must be ensured that the delicate space is protected against such potential opponents or adversaries. This is done by ensuring that the mode, style and rules of construction are followed to the letter. And for the most superstitious families, a witchdoctor is engaged to perform rituals to fend off future aggression. Normally, a chicken must be slaughtered, and its blood sprinkled over the gate spot. Looking at the design and architecture of the home stead, its landscape and terrain would most likely ensure that the *oula* runoff water, will flow out of the home through the gate. In a way, therefore, gravitational force, fixes the space taken by the gate and the location in which all disputes with outsiders are settled. However, when things go wrong, and a home dweller falls sick, this is the space to be examined to figure out what could be ailing the patient. This often will involve the medicine man with reputation for dealing with such matters. Like the gate, there are other openings for the home such as the doors windows and *rode* that are given equal if not similar protection.

6. The Binary Phenomenon

It must be remembered that the topography, landscape and elevation will determine where the father who is the owner of the home puts up his house, and where his sons will pitch their huts known as *simba*. It can be seen here that there is an up down binary structure, where the old people occupy the upper end of the space while the younger ones settle on the lower spots. Should this given structure be ignored for one reason or another, there will be a resultant illness and a medicine man must be engaged to perform rituals to restore health. One is raised with these faiths and one is not free to break away from them. There are also binary forces at play in

terms of where which son puts up his hut. The first son puts up his hut or *simba* at the right-hand side of the mother's house, as one faces the gate. The second son will go to the left and this tradition is followed in turns until all the boys have been accommodated. There is fusion between up-down and left-right phenomenon at play in distributing population on the surface of the earth, all going by gravitational pull of water and its flow. Where one is a polygamist, the wives are also settled down according to the up-down left-right principle. At death, the male ones are buried on their right-hand side, while the females are buried on their left. In fact, the land tenure, adjudication and inheritance are determined according to the norm of binary ideas described above. The males lie on their left while the females lie on their right in the graves too. The reasons for this departure from the established routine where the left signifies female and the right signifies male is out of the scope of this paper but remains an interesting subject for investigation.

7. Spatial Linearity and the Home

The home space is organized in a linear order marked by the serial manner in which the residents are born and how this order is observed in putting up of homes, huts and ploughing patterns. The first-born son puts up a *simba* first before his siblings and he goes on in turn to construct his own home before them all. The rest, however, must follow in descending order. For ploughing, cultivating, planting, wedding and harvest; the order is strictly followed. It starts with the eldest couple, who also happen to occupy the top of the terrain and landscape and comes down in sequence to the youngest couple. All these activities are preceded by ritualistic sexual activities that are mandatory. It is a taboo to jump the queue! Since the farming activities are synchronised with seasons, it becomes imperative that the linear organization of this society is tied in the long run to the solar system and its impact on seasons. For that matter, the health of the residents of the home depends on harmonious alignment to the solar system. The abundance of harvest and in turn, the health of this community would revolve around the congruence with nature. Incongruence is immediately punished by inflicting illness that cannot be healed until a seer, shaaman or medicine man is invited to diagnose the problem, then rectify it by administering *manyasi* herbal medicine. This linear organization is observed by generations to generations

and from eternity to eternity according to Mboya. The procreation, fertility rate, mortality and morbidity and life expectancy all depend on these observations.

The medicine man would come to the home and ‘read it’ to figure out what could have gone out of tune with the rules. He might find it in the misplacement of the gate for example or might find it in the wrong timing of the act or not having followed the order given in the cultural blueprint. He acts as a cultural detective, examining witnesses, investigating the history and hunting for the exhibits of bits and pieces that might have been left on the environment. The past is brought into play in order to gaze at the future, therefore one can argue that the Luo homestead is designed in a futuristic pattern. There is style, shape and pattern that would ensure that all the succeeding generations thrive and conversely, there are patterns that would decimate the entire generations to come. The home becomes a site of cultural contests in which ensues subversion, conformity and confrontation (Collins, 1989). Sometimes one sees the home’s contested meanings as a thing that hesitates between different spaces and times; between natural and supernatural explanations, or between the hidden and the open (McHale, 1992). A trained culturalist personality should be able to interpret the spatial-temporal semiotics and discover the genesis of family tragedies. The people in this context live in a fictive and imaginary world with patterns and this world could have some inherent limitations, but these phenomena have been time-tested, tried and trusted over a long duration.

A Luo who rebels against these beliefs is taking a self-destructive mode or trying to commit suicide (Hutcheon, 2014). Conforming to constant artistic form is a life-giving force to the Luo and if one promotes disorder, chaos and distortion or confusion, it will result in madness. The Luo ontology and history indicate that when order is maximised, production in farming activities and even reproduction is equally maximised. Ambiguity where things are left in a vague position becomes vexing and makes people vulnerable to disease. Such ambiguity that emanates from discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation and fragmentation Hassan (1987), do appear to be not tolerated in the Luo community. Yet the home as a text is an artistic creation, with shifting meanings because of instabilities engraved intrinsically in its image. The Luo seem to be happy with what Hassan calls the tyranny of wholes. One is not free to subvert, convert or

pervert the spatial-temporal image of the home.

The Luo home construct has endured time by replication from place to place or time to time and has resisted the onslaught of westernisation and the advent of colonialism, just by yielding the margins of the structure but maintaining the original main frame. Even where the residents of a home are adherents of Christian faith, when faced with chronic diseases or unexplainable malaise, they resort to their traditional practices to ward off dire consequences. For example, when a man has died away from his home, his body cannot be brought back into the home using the normal *rangach* gate. Instead, *otuchi* entrance [small opening] is made on the fence to let in the coffin. It is believed that if the body passes through the normal gate, the home will be infected with illnesses coming from the spirit of the diseased. The same way, if a teen age girl dies at her father's home before she is married off, the body will be interred out of the homestead. This means putting up the grave outside the circular euphorbia fence that separates insiders from the outsiders. Otherwise, her spirit will bother the family and stop all her sibling girls of the present and future generations from settling in marriage (Mboya, 1978). This is why the Luo refer to the girls as *ogwang* meaning the wild cat, that belongs to the bush outside the home space. It is observed that such architectural designs can be used symbolically to communicate, through their shapes like the circle, in many cultures, to signify the mysticism of houses, tombs, and religious spiritualism (Collins, Ackerman, Scruton, & Gowans, 2016). The anthropologists like Setha (2014) consider this the phenomenon of spatializing culture, which is the linking of culture and space through material, metaphorical, and social conceptualizations to life.

Low (2014) appears to back the Luo notion that the meaning of space is not limited to narratives of the folklore, but also includes interacting with the physical materials in the environment. This is why the spaces and times signify concepts that give or take away life. Though these are socially constituted notions of space and time, they impact on every member of the community very gravely because they are inbuilt in their psychology. The landscape, elevation, topography and orientation become strategic in terms of whether the home inhabitants live or die. As we have observed above, when illness attacks, the healing process begins on the environment according to Mboya (1978), and that environment is designed in space and time

according to the gravitational forces reflected by the pattern of runoff water flow. Diagnosis and remedial action often involve rituals and sacrifices, and this is the point in which a synthesis occurs between Science and Religion. Even though the Luo are not scientists in the literal sense, the symbiosis here becomes too strong to be ignored. It is like scientific principles engage human kind, shape them, control their thinking and manage their beliefs and out of that interplay, a religion is born. Probably this is why Whyne-Hammond and Charles (1979) and Ahmed, (2009) observe that human settlements are specifically located on the earth surface where human habitants spread out according to a unique phenomenon of nature. They also go on to observe that the phenomena that control human settlement have fascinated scholars and researchers over the years. In their view, the questions of settlements are important in all facets of life because it is through their development that man can explore the environment for his needs. Given that several factors do influence location and distribution of settlement over space, the two researchers emphasize that human settlements, forms, patterns, distributions, types and sizes do change with time. For the Luo, the gravitational force plays a very significant role on these matters and stabilizes their world view.

8. Conflict between Science and Religion

For the Luo, there is no conflict or incompatibility between science and religion. The supernatural forces or entities intervene in the Luo affairs according to whether the subject has conformed or contravened the cultural provisions of the home. It is their traditions and alignment to the natural forces such as sunrise, sunset, the rainy or dry seasons or landscape that govern their worship. While the west bases their scientific analysis on observation of natural evidence, the Luo just tie their religion to the natural patterns of nature. The liminality of the homestead, regarding such places as doors, gates, windows and fences and spots of performances of rituals become crucial in the life cycle of the Luo. These spots and times become sacred spaces and times. The sacred spaces and times are sites that are contested and protected at all costs, because the Luo believe the family could become sickly out of charms planted in such places if left unprotected.

Science and religion are so integrated in this faith and one cannot find contradictions

between them. The homestead is designed by the scientific flow of water caused by elevation of the landscape and gravity. It is treated as a temple where the worship is integrated to the cultural heritage. On this platform, the unborn are linked to the living and the dead. Procreation is spaced out by timed mating synchronised to the cycles of natural seasons. Such interactions are also ordered according to the age sets in a descending order. After birth, the time the baby spends in the house before it is brought out depends on its gender. The baby girl takes three days and the male ones take five days. This interval is reversed at death. The burial ceremony of *tero buru* is organized in a week for a female but in a month for a male character. In between birth and death, the people's rites of passage are ordered strictly according to sequence in which the people were born. The sacred spaces for offering sacrifices in the home include the gate, the door and the centre of the house above which there is *osuri* on the roof. There is a pole running from the centre of the house to the roof. It is this pole which holds up the roof. If sickness afflicted the inhabitants of this house, a medicine man would examine this space among other spaces to determine the causes of the illnesses and figure out their remedy. The binary thinking demands that the males are buried on the right-hand side while the females are buried on the left.

Long time ago, a man of the house used to be buried at the Siro pole at the centre of his house. The grave was not supposed to be too deep because the dead man's spirit was expected to continue guarding the family. He would oversee the family by sending back dreams and visions. It was believed that a deep grave would deter the spirit from coming back. That apart, it also signified that the family did not love the dead and they expressed it by digging a deep grave. After the coming of colonialists, this practice was discouraged as indecent and repugnant to descent civilization. It was abandoned and replaced by burying people outside the door. Even this has ceased. However, the non-Christian families still insist on burying a man of the home with his head facing *rangach* gate, to allow the dead to continue to guard the home by watching his gate. We have seen the homestead's surrounding, the surface and how they are organized by rituals, ceremonies and to some extent by sacrifices. The space above the home is not left unprotected. Of course, the altitude will have been observed by the *oula* phenomenon and spacing of houses. On the main house of the first wife, there is planted a stick known as *osuri*. It plays

multiple roles. First, it holds the grass thatched on the roof together. The subtle role it plays is to signify the presence of the husband. When the man dies, this stick is removed following certain rituals and the roof sends out signals to all and sundry that the house is without a husband. One can compare this with national flags that symbolize the presence of the head of state or government. After a given period, when the woman in question has found a substitute husband, a ritual is organized to mount up a new *osuri* and welcome the new husband to the home.

9. Conclusion

It is possible to see the Luo homestead as a temple. It is designed and governed by strictly observed taboo system. For some reasons, these taboos can be contravened and when that happens, the restorative remedy is brought about by *manyasi* and sacrifices. The home is also spaced out according the altitude, landscape and elevation. This is enforced by the *oula* waterflow that spreads populations across the land. The distribution is done through the binary structure of left right and up down pattern. While the spatial patterns are organized according to the flow of water, the temporal factors are enforced by observing the circles and cycles of nature which are linear. The gravity as a scientific principle does not antagonise the faith of the people. Far from that, it is an invaluable ally to the faith and belief system of the Luo. These beliefs have influenced the Luo life style from eternity and will go to eternity. The researcher found out that even though modernization and Christianity have wiped out such faiths, this was only found to be on the surface. However, when the chips are down, and the people face an insurmountable problem, they resort to traditional ways of organizing the space and time around them. Such traditions are very much alive in sorting out social, medical or property disputes. The elders still apply the rules to hold communities together and uphold peace. It is also observed that since such beliefs are taught through folklore, they are self-enforced and do not need external policing. For that matter, they are cheap to maintain, and they reduce protracted disputes and litigation that would otherwise end up in our modern courts.

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