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REVIEW ARTICLE

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A.B.C. Ocholla-Ayayo: *Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo,* Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala 1976, p. 248.

1 A NEW HERMENEUTIC SITUATION

"There is much that I did not see or inquire into and therefore plenty of opportunity for others to make investigations in the same field and among neighbouring peoples. I hope that they will do so and that one day we may have a fairly complete record of Nilotic systems." This was written by Evans-Pritchard in 1940 (*The Nuer,* p. 15). Writing at that time, he could hardly have foreseen the new type of social investigator which is now beginning to emerge: the African (for instance), who has gone through a training in Western social thought and who applies his training in describing his own culture. Ocholla-Ayayo is one of these pioneers in the description of African culture from the African point of view.

The new type of social investigator which Ocholla represents fills himself into a different hermeneutic situation. He has some assets which the investigator coming from Europe lacked, and he has disadvantages of a kind which his European counterparts never had to the same extent. To begin with the assets, the African who reports in his own culture has none of the limitation of language which has hampered earlier work to a greater or lesser extent. Writing about his own culture, he has the great advantage of being able to work within the world of his mother-tongue. He can write about education in his own society with the undeniable authority of one who has gone through the educational system as a child and youth. He has a basis of lived-through experience, against which he can check, correct and supplement earlier reports which have been written from the observer's point of view.

But familiarity with one's own culture is not merely a blessing when one is faced with the task of describing and analysing the setting of one's own experience. As Ludwig Wittgenstein once pointed out, "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something - because it is always before one's eyes)." (*Philosophical Investigations,* § 129). The participant who wants to transform himself into an observer finds himself faced with the problem of distancing himself from his own culture in order to be able to

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see it in perspective.As a member of his society, he has acquired a range of "knowing how." As an analyst, he finds himself faced with the task of transforming his "knowing how" into "knowing that."

The transformation of knowing how into knowing that, which is typical of linguistics and the social sciences, requires competence at two levels, which might be referred to as the participant's level and the observer's level. The advantages of the participant-turned-observer are counterbalanced by the disadvantages he is bound to have at the observer's level. At the analytical level, he has to work within a language and tradition which is not his own. Where previous social investigators had the advantage of being able to write from the viewpoint of a cultural tradition which was their own, the new type of social investigator has to write from the viewpoint of foreign culture.In short, what was unfamiliar and initially strange to the traditional social scientist now becomes familiar to the new type of social scientist; and what was familiar for the investigator from Europe now becomes initially unfamiliar and strang for the investigator from Africa. The ups and downs are reversed.

Ocholla-Ayayo does not explicitly consider the peculiarities of the hermeneutic situation in which he is placed, but the effect of the reversed situation are perceptible throughout his work.He touches on the problem at one place, where he writes that his investigations "have advanced from the concrete and tangible to the abstract" (p.13). This is true in at least two ways. In the first place, he grew up in Luoland in Kenya and acquired an immediate acquaintance with the concrete and tangible aspects of Luo culture. In the second place, he has carried out studies of the material culture of the Luo, which are going to be published separately, as he tells us. His deep knowledge of the material aspects of Luo culture are evident also in the present work, for instance in the chapter on withcraft and medicine, where the author is able to give detailed accounts of the objects and medicines which belong to such specialists as the *Janawi* (pp. 156ff.)

The emphasis of the present work is, however, not on the material culture, which is referred to only when the context makes it necessary to do so. With the bravery which is characteristic of the Luo, the author has set himself the task of surveying traditional Luo thought and ethics with a special emphasis on traditional rules of conduct and values.

2   THE SYSTEM OF LUO ETHICS AND IDEOLOGY

In his delimitation of the fields of ethics and ideology, Ocholla follows some suggestions which I made some years ago in my book on *Sudanese Ethics* and related papers. I then proposed that an individual's ideology could be defined - provisionally and programmatically - as "the whole of that individual's beliefs, convictions, ideals, standards and values" (*Sudanese Ethics*, p. 14); and that an individual's ethics could be regarded as consisting of "all those ideals, norms, conceptions of right and wrong , good and bad,

and so on, which together make up his idea of the good life" (op. cit., p. 18). The definitions can easily be extended to cover the ethics and ideologies of groups and societies, as Ocholla does (pp. 25-28). On these definitions, the ethics of a society will belong to its ideology. Besides ethics, the ideology of a society will include its world-view (metaphysontology, cosmology), its views on the nature of man (anthropology), its legal thought, and so forth.

If one defines "descriptive ethics" as "the description and analysis of ideals of life" (*Sudanese Ethics*, p. 18), it is obvious that the term "descriptive ethics" will refeer to an area which is a common ground for philosophers and social anthropologist, amongst others. In practice, there are however clearly noticeable differences in the way in which philosophers and social anthropologists approach the field of descriptive ethics. Most of the work which has been done on ethics by philosophers belongs to other fields than descriptive ethics, viz. normative ethics and metaethics. There are, however, some philosophical contributions to the descriptive study of existing ethical systems, like R.B. Brandt's study of Hopi ethics in *Hopi ethics* (The University of Chicago Press, 1954), John Ladd's study of Navaho ethics in *The Struggle of a Moral Code* (Harvard University Press, 1957) and Placide Tempels' study of Bantu ethics in *Bantu Philosophy* (Presence Africaine, Paris, 1959). When compared to social-anthropological accounts of ethics and ideology, the philosophical accounts seem more theoretically orientated. Conceptual analysis and definition problems loom large in the books referred to, and there are refined discussions of methodological points. The emphasis is throughout on the articulation and systematization of norms and values. The social setting of the ethics studies is kept in the background.

In the accounts of social anthropologists, the social setting comes into the foreground, and the detailed analysis of concept and theoretical procedures is much less emphasized. In practice social anthropologists show a much greater awareness of the ways in which ethical beliefs and norms are embedded in social structures than the average philosopher does. It is for this reason that accounts of this kind are such a useful supplement to philosophical analyses. The lack of social embedding in the philosophical literature on ethics is probably one of the reasons why even practitioners in the field have sometimes expressed misgivings about the whole enterprise. In 1874, Henry Sidgwick talked of the "trite" subject of ethics (*The Methods of Ethics, Preface*) and a few years later Thomas Hill Green observed "that Moral Philosophy is a name of somewhat equivocal repute: that it commands less respect among us than was probably the case a century ago; and that any one who professes to teach or write upon a subject to which this name is in any proper or distinctly sense applicable, is looked upon with some suspicion" (*Prolegomena to Ethics,* Introduction, 1883). In a recent survey of ethics one philosopher points out that English-speaking analytic philosophy for many decades has dealt either by way of general theorizing about moral judgement or moral discourse as a whole or by way of detailed conceptual analysis. The first approach, he comments, tends to make ethics look "empty", the second approach makes it look "disjointed"

(G.J. Warnock, *The object of Morality,* Foreword 1971).

I confess that I feel compelled to agree with these writers. One of the main reasons why ethical studies so often look empty is, in my opinion, that the study of ethics has become divorced from the study of society. Against this background, it is refreshing to read a work like Ocholla-Ayayo's *Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo.* Throughout his treatment of Luo ethics and ideology, one senses the effects of his insights into the ways in which abstract concepts and general norms and values are anchored in everyday actions and institutions.

Ocholla gives a clear account of the traditional system of education (chapter III). He describes the traditional institutions of the *Duol,* the *Siwindhi* and the *Simba* in some detail. He illustrates how traditional norms and values are transmitted with the help of stories, proverbs, and riddles. The central role of ethics in traditional education is brought out very clearly. This is certainly one of the best chapters in the book.

In the following chapter (IV), he analyzes the machinery used for settling disputes, again with a great number of concrete details and illustrations. The organization of the basic household units, the *Jakawuoro* and the *Jokamiyo,* are described in chapter V, which also gives an account of Luoland laws.

The complicated set of beliefs and rules related to marriage in Luo society is described in chapter VI. Chapter VII describes some aspects of witchcraft and medicine, which are relevant for the understanding of the ethics and thought of the Luo. The Luo world-view is presented in outline in chapter VIII, which tries to clarify the relations between Luo conceptions of God and the nature of the universe, and their ethical norms and values.

As in other tribal societies, the kinship system plays a central role in the organisation of Luo society, and a central core of its ethics and ideology is directly tied to kinship relations. Ocholla stresses the role of "kinship values" among the Luo (pp. 37-39), and gives accounts of the kinship structures in chapters V and IX. The term "kinship value" does not seem to be the novelty that Ocholla assumes, when he writes that "It is not common in the general discussion to talk about 'kinship value', and neither can we find a clear definition of 'kinship value' in the anthropological studies of kinship system of different societies" (p.37). Evans-Pritchard used the term at several places in *The Nuer,* for instance on p. 225, where he wrote that "the values with which chiefs regulate behaviour between one person and another in *Nuer* society are kinship values". But Ocholla finds that Evans-Pritchard and other previous investigators have over emphasized the role of the kinship system at the expense of political institutions to be found in Luoland. He therefore devotes a chapter to the description of the political organisation of Luo society (chapter IX), again demonstrating his profound knowledge of the details of the society he is investigating. There is also a chapter on the in-situation of "virtue boasting" (*Pakruok*), illustrated with many examples which shed considerable light on the Luo system of virtues. Bravery, generosity, and respect for one's superiors emerge as central qualities, and one gets a vivid picture of ongoing competition for status which seems to be

characteristic of life in Luo society. (Chapter II). These descriptive chapters (II - IX), which form the bulk of the book, are surrounded by two more theoretical chapters, a general introduction, and some supplements which partly repeat stuff which has been presented earlier in the text.

It should be clear from this survey of the contents of the thesis that Ocholla's approach is more social-anthropological and ethnographical than philosophical. The chapters in which he presents and describes the main institutions of Luo society make up the larger part of the book. They are also far better than the more theoretical chapters. One does not have to read much of chapter I and chapter X to discover that the author's connections with the traditions of Western philosophy are rather loose.

Having been honoured with the task of criticizing the book on this solemn occasion, I therefore find myself faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, there is the bulk of the book which is a detailed ethnographic account of a society, of which I have no firsthand knowledge, and this part of the book I regard as the strongest part. On this part of the work I have no special competence to draw upon. On the other hand, my professional training as a philosopher makes me qualified to comment upon the two chapters which must be regarded as the weakest part of the work. I shall attempt to evade the horns of the dilemma in the following way. First I shall discuss some aspects of the ethical system which is the subject of the thesis, in the hope that some points will be clarified in the discussion. Second, I shall briefly take up some points which are inevitable when the book is to be judged as a contribution to the academic tradition of learning. Lastly, I shall comment on some issues raised by the theoretical parts of the book.

3   DISGRACE: *KWER* AND *CHIRA*

At the end of the thesis, Ocholla sums up the Luo system of ethics in the following statements:

> To the Luo, we do what is right, if, and only if, it will not disgrace one's self, family or lineage; or if it will not cause *Chira,* and it is not *Kwer.* We do what is considered wrong if, and only if, our actions violate the Luo customs and rules of conduct in such a way that disgrace, *(Nyingi kethore), Chira* or *Kwer* is inevitable. The right thing to do is, therefore, the action or relationship which will not cause *Kethruok-Nying', Chira* to anyone else, or cause destructive consequences to one's self, to the family lineage or to the nation (p.226).

Linguistically, the formulations are rather complicated. If we take into consideration that an action is right if and only if it is not wrong, it would seem possible to bring out the gist of the statements above in the following way:

> An action is considered to be right if and only if the following conditions are fulfilled: (1) the action does not cause disgrace to oneself, one's family or one's lineage; and (2) the action does not cause *Chira;* and (3) the action is not *Kwer.*

The phrase "if and only if" is usually taken to indicate a set of necessary and sufficient conditons. The conditions just formulated imply strong claims: every action which fulfils the three conditions is right, and there are no actions which are right on other grounds. In order to be able to decide whether this holds water or not, we must have an analyis of the three key concepts in the statement: the concepts of *disgrace, Kwer* and *Chira*.

Unfortunately, there is no index in the book, which means that the kind of checking which is required tends to be time-consuming and also that it may be easy to miss some passages. I have found a number of references to *Kwer* and *Chira* throughout the text, but none to *Nying, kethore* or *Kethruok-Nying'*. One of my questions, then, is: do the terms *Nyingi kethore* and *Kethruok-Nying'* mean the same? Is "disgrace" an adequate translation of both terms? Are there no situations in which the two terms would be used differently?

Although there are no reference in the text to *Nyingi kethore* and *Kethrouk-Nying* (as far as I have been able to find), there are a couple of passages where a term which seems to be related occurs. On page 42, one finds the statement *"Rito nying' gi winjruok maber"* with the translation "Every relationship and action is definable in terms of honour and good name". And on page 14 "Nying'" is again mentioned in a context dealing with "prestige and honour". (There the author says that *"Nying', Ber, Chuny, Thuon, Teko* shall be given detailed study", but this promise does not seem to have been carried out in the book.) Another clue is to be found on p. 222, where the author states that the goodness or badness of an action is affected by how it could affect "one's own being (i.e. how it could affect honour and dignity. Since this is contrasted with how an action could affect one's family, lineage or clan, and also with how it could affect "common friendship and cooperation", one might perhaps infer that honour and dignity in Luo society are considered to be individual matters Cf. also p. 224, where "personal honour (*Nying' maber*)" seems to be contrasted with *Chira* and *Kwer* which do not seem to be personal matters.

There are a number of passages in the text where terms which seem to be related to the concept of disgrace occur, e.g. "honour", "dignity", "respect", "prestige" (see e.g. pp. 71, 95-96, 135, 222, 226). A number of references to "insults" also point to the importance of personal prestige in Luo society.

But there are also indicatons that honour and respect cannot be an individual affair. Ocholla stresses the role of competition and rivalry among the Luo (*Nyieko* or *Nyiego*), and even accords it the place of being "the fundamental primary relationship in the Luo society" (p. 122). Now *Nyieko* occurs not only between individuals such as between the co-wives who belong to the same polygynous family, but also between groups (e.g. "matrifocal unit" p. 121; cf. p. 165, note 13, where *Nyiego* is said to occur between "houses, clans and sub-tribes"). And, to revert to the quotation which we started from (from p. 226), disgrace is said to affect "one's self, family or lineage".

Now, against the background of my own experience with similar concepts of respect, dignity and honour in the Northern Sudan, I should like to venture the following hypothesis: there is a notion of "respect" or "dignity" among the Luo, which is primarily tied to the individual's status. But since every individual is part of wider social networks, and since his personal status is partly dependent upon the status of the network to which he belongs, it is impossible to distinguish sharply between personal honour and the honour (dignity, status etc.) of one's family, clan, subtribe, etc. If this is right, the concepts of honour and dignity and the related concept of disgrace which the Luo have would function in the same way as the notion of *karama* seemed to do in the ethics of my Sudanese informants: "The notion of *karama*/dignity/holds a key position in the informant ethical systems. *karama* is closely related to the highly stringent norms of *sharaf*/honour/ and *ird* /decency/, as we have seen and it is also related, in a more indirect way, to the virtues of courage, generosity and hospitality, and so on. For in order to be said to have dignity, one must be respected by other people, and to command the respect of others, one must conform to a high degree to at least the more important of the moral norms which are generally accepted. To get on in the Sudanese society, one has to preserve one's *karama*" (*Sudanese Ethics*, p. 105.)

If the parallels between the notions of *karama,* or rather lack of *karama*, and disgrace (*Nyingi kethore, Kethruok-Nyingi*) hold, then the notion of disgrace would indeed sum up an important segment of Luo ethics. The virtues which are paraded in the practice of *Pakruok* and instilled in the traditional education would then be internally related to the notion of disgrace, prestige, personal honour and dignity. (See esp. chapters II—II on courage, generosity, hospitality, honesty respect for one's seniors, and so forth.) One would also expect a close relationship between sexual mores and disgrace, parallel to the effects that loss of *'ird* inevitably has for *karama.* There are indeed signs that this is so. The Luo seem, for instance, to attach the same importance to virginity as the Arabs in the Northern Sudan do (Ocholla, p. 135, 143); and if a bridgegroom proves impotent at the crucial moment, this is said to be "shameful to his parents and relatives" (p. 143. When Ocholla sums up the norms related to marriage and family life among the Luo, he refers to "rules of respect and rules against anti-social behaviour" as well as to rules which are connected with *Chira* and *Kwer* (p. 149). If "rules of respect and rules of anti-social behavior" is taken to mean the same *as "rules which are such that disgrace results when they are broken"* then the statement on family and marriage norms agrees well with the three conditions on right acts which we started from (p. 7): an action is right if and only if it does not lead to disgrace, does not cause *Chira* and is not *Kwer.* I turn now to the concepts of *Chira* and *Kwer.* In his recent book on *Luo Religion and Folklore* (Universtetsforlaget, Oslo 1974), Hans-Egil Hauge reports on the views of the medicine man Barnabas Kidenda, old man whose father was killed in 1899. Barnabas Kidenda is said to have the following views on the nature of *Chira: Chira* is not exactly an illness, but a wasting away, which may

lead to death. Only small.children and babies get this and it is caused by e.g. a quarrel between the child's mother and her mother-in-law. In such a case the little baby will automatically get *chira*.... A baby will also get *chira* if its father has committed adultery." (Hauge 1974, p. 70; cf. p. 62, where Barnabas Kidenda is reported to have said that *Chira* is a "kind of illness".) But this gives no real indication of the role of the concept of *Chira* in Luo ethics, according to Ocholla (cf. his critique of Hauge, p. 117, n. 18, and p. 118, n. 21).

The concepts of *Kwer* and *Chira* are said to be closely related, so that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them (p. 104). One difference between the two terms seems to be that *Kwer* is a property of actions, whereas *Chira* is described as a certain type of consequences of actions which are *Kwer*. Ocholla usually translates the term "Kwer" as "forbidden", for instance in the list of forbidden actions in the sexual sphere on p. 105, which includes items like the following:

(a) It is forbidden to marry within one's own clan or clans close genealogically, or to have sexual intercourse within them.
(b) It is forbidden to marry within one's lineage or have any sexual intercourse.
(c) It is forbidden to have sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of puberty, *Japidi*.
(d) It is *Kwer* to marry a woman before *Chodo Kola*—that is a woman whose husband has just died must undergo a sexual ceremony of Chodo Kola..."

There are two types of *Kwer* actions, according to Ocholla. The more portentous type of *Kwer* actions are actions which are regarded as "offenses against society" as a whole ("the state"). Such actions are referred to in the present work as "high level *Kwer*" (e.g. p. 117, n. 18; p. 104. 149). The less serious type of *Kwer* actions does not affect the society as a whole but brings about bad consequences for individuals and their families and lineage and "at its highest it affects the clan" (p. 149; cf. p. 104, 105, 152, n, 27, etc.). Such actions are referred to as "lower level *Kwer*" (e.g. p. 117, n. 18).

Now *Chira* may be defined as the bad consequences which breaking a lower level *Kwer* rule may lead to. "It may be said that *Kwer* is simply forbidden acts, which at a lower level cause *Chira* (destructive consequences to individual family and his lineage) while at a higher level it is as destructive to the whole society" (p. 104). (Cf. similar statements on p. 110, p. 118, n. 21, p. 143, pp. 146ff., p. 222, etc.)

Most of the examples given in the text of actions which are *Kwer* and which may bring *Chira* are related to sexual mores and the family institution (ch. IV and ch. VI). But there are also some examples from other fields. Killing a stranger who is crossing to tribal lands might jeopardize the welfare of the whole tribe; this would therefore be a case of higher level *Kwer,* it

seems (p. 103). Suicide would seem to belong to the same category of higher level *Kwer* (ibid.). It is also forbidden, *Kwer*, to eat dogs, cats, snakes, and insects (with the exception of ants and locusts) flesh-eating birds, etc. (p. 169). It should be interesting to know whether this exhausts the list of actions which are considered to be *Kwer* and *Chira*-bringing or whether the list could be added to.

What about witchcraft, for instance? Ocholla stresses that sorcery and witchcraft are usually (though not always) considered to be "anti-social" (see e.g. p. 155, 159, 160, 162). Now it seems that "anti-social acts" are acts which lead to loss of prestige, loss of honour, loss of dignity, loss of status. Anti-social acts would then seem to fall within the first category of acts we are discussing, viz. acts which cause disgrace to the individual and perhaps also to his family and lineage. But it is not clear from the text whether witchcraft and sorcery would also be regarded as *Kwer* and as actions which might bring *Chira*.

And what about those actions which are enumerated on p. 142 as carrying the sanction of banishment: incest, sodomy, homosexuality, bestiality, premeditated murder of a tribesman, continual trouble-making within the clan, persistent theft, robbery? Under which of the three categories of wrong actions do they fall? Are they merely anti—social, or also lower-level *Kwer* and therefore causing *Chira*, or are they higher-level *Kwer*? If my thesis in *Sudanese Ethics* is right, that ethical terms have an open texture and that their meaning can only be adequately described through an examination of good lists of examples, then it would seem possible to shed further light on the concepts of *Kwer* and *Chira* by doing more casuistic work (i.e by describing more cases falling under the concepts). It is clear enough that the first items on the list just given are *Kwer* acts which lead to *Chira,* at least; but what about murder and theft etc.?