

"Culture a mark of a peoples' identity: The importance of the Kakwa Social Organization as a peaceful community found in three countries in Africa." By Mr. Losuba Ludoru Wongo Upele¹

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The Kakwa People

Geographically, the Kakwa occupy a vast administrative area of Yei and Morobo in Southern Sudan. They also extend to parts of Congo and Uganda. In Uganda, they are found in the extreme North of West Nile, Koboko district. In Koboko, Kakwa land consist mainly of flat open plateaus with stretches of land crossed by the main river (Kaya) at the border of Koboko with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) drawing through Koboko district eastward to the Nile. While on the side of Sudan, the area has some long ranges of hills with slightly bushy, thick forests and fertile agricultural land. Since the soil is fertile, people expect rain often with very reliable seasons.

¹ This is an extract from a complete first class dissertation presented for a Bachelors of Arts degree for Ethnics and Development Studies at Uganda Martyrs University, Uganda in 2001.

The Origin¹

According to research carried out in South Sudan where Kakwa are said to have originated, there is precisely one popular story about the origin of the Kakwa. Kakwa are said to be people from Abyssinia, now Ethiopia. They belong to *Eteka* family. Eteka was a nation found between present Ethiopia and Somalia. They were pastoralists, well organized politically, socially, and militarily. Because of drought, they were forced to migrate southward. On their way, they fought and captured a number of kingdoms around Ethiopia and went as far as Turkana and Masai land in Kenya where they settled for sometime.

Turkana land was not so fertile, therefore, they had to change direction westward to the vast land of the Sudan crossing the Nile looking for pasture. They did not stop after crossing the Nile, however, they went as far as fighting the Zande Kingdom (Maridi) under the then famous king Buduwe. There, they lost the battle and were prevented from penetrating Central African Republic and Congo. By this time the *Eteka* main force (the base where the king stays) was east of the Nile, around Torit area. With the blow they got, all the different forces remained in their respective units, while, developing appropriate strategies for their survival.

Normally, when a well-organized nation prepares for an offensive, each force bears special secret code name. The force that crossed west of the Nile was divided into six groups. The leader of each group was determined by his/her ability and that determines which direction to take. Therefore, Jubek the elder son to Mukunyet (the King) who was very submissive and polite in character was sent to the present Juba town, from the name Jubek. Jubek descendance are referred to as *Paparara*, popularly known as *Pari*. This was changed to *Bari* by

¹ A discussion about the origin of Bari with Mobuto Moumur Mete and elders, at Yei, July, 1999.

the Arabs, possibly by the Ottoman Turks in 1820, since the Arabic language does not have the letter *p* in its alphabet.

As an elderly old and submissive son, Jubek could not wage fierce war to defend the kingdom from the Dinka. A force with a code name *Mundara* (meaning mob and hostile force who normally act without orders) was sent to face the Dinka in order to defend Jubek from the North.

The third force was under *Onyoanyar* or *Onyanyari* who was mild and polite. He was a famous chief and good in politics and war. Since he is good in politics, his force was sent to face the Zande with an aim to convince them in order to penetrate the area. Afterwards the force was code named *Po-ju-lio* (come my friend). This group is currently known as the *Pojulu*.

Between the *Mundara* and the *Pojulu*, the *Nyambara/nyombora* (horn) force was later sent to assist the *pojulu* from the *Muru* as the fourth group. The fifth force was from Wajak family. Wajak had mild and strong memory and was able to memorize the legendary of the kingdom. Him and the family was located South of Juba to boarder the Ma'di who were believed not a threat to the kingdom. Because of their strong memory, they were code named *Kukuwon*, meaning the known, currently called *Kuku*.

The sixth force was to go beyond the *Pojulu* and the *Kuku* to defend the kingdom from the Lendu and the Lugbara in Congo. It was the strongest force and well organized. By that time the Lubgara and the Lendu were heard to be carnivorous which actually posed a big threat to the *Eteka* kingdom. This force was code named *Kikuwa*, which means thorns. It comes from the fact that in the past, families use thorns for making fences around villages or homesteads. Hence the *Kikuwa*, now *Kakwa*, were fierce fighters, brilliant and with sound mind. They have socially well organized system and often act when they have well established

reasons to the cause. As a result, they are peaceful and can be harsh when need comes.

As seen above, the historical origin of the Kakwa has been a long one. This has made many Kakwa families during the colonial partition of Africa to lose track about their origin, although commonly they know where they come from. This is quite clear as Kakwa from both Uganda and DRC all trace their ancestors from the Sudan.² For example, those in Uganda maintained two traditions about their origin. One is that the ancestor of the Kakwa of Uganda was *Yeki*. He is said to have migrated from Korobe hill, South Sudan, and settled in mountain Liru in Koboko. The second tradition claims that the Kakwa were originally known as *Kui*. The *Kui* are said to have been fierce fighters who inflicted victories on their enemies. *Kui* was then later nicknamed *Kakuwa* which means "bitter" and thorny.

Therefore, with this brief history about Kakwa origin we can conclude that the Kakwa are people from the Sudan with structured organizations and victorious characteristic. This has made it easier for them to relate confidently to their neighbouring ethnic groups. From this background we can now be able to narrow the discussion to political, economic, and social organizations of the Kakwa.

Political Organization

From the origin of the Kakwa as seen earlier, the Kakwa had well organized political system. This justifies the fact that each African society has its own political system. Political organizations of the Kakwa were segmentary.³ They have strong types of kinship groupings with strong kinship ties. In terms of power

² Richard Nzita and Mbagwa-Nwampa, *Peoples and Cultures of Uganda*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers Ltd. 1993 p130.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

exercise, *Ketimi* (clan) was the basic social and political unit. Each clan was politically independent of others and it enjoyed sufficient traditional loyalty.⁴

At the head of each clan, there is a chief known as *Matta*. Other clans have them referred to as *Burata*. Those clans usually are special for their ritual performance and rainmaking. The highest political leader is the chief usually helped by council of elders, called *Temejik*, who run the courts. The *Temejik* were more often than not, heads of sub-clans and were related to the chief as brothers and uncles.

Often the leadership is hereditary. The population under a chief is above 200. Every chieftainship has a system of collecting tax which was paid in form of labor or produce. The produce often is kept to assist during times of famine.

Economic organization

Since agriculture has been the most common economic activity in most African societies, the Kakwa also follow similar activity. It should be noted that as the Kakwa migrated through Kapoeta and Torit, they lost their cattle and more so when they settled around Yei area they changed their livelihood to hunting, gathering fruits, and cultivation which has become their main economic activity. Their economy has been subsistence agriculture and mixed farming. They keep cattle, goats, sheep and chicken besides cultivation. Some few families specialized in iron smelting, making spears, arrows, knives, hoes, and variety of iron implements.⁵

Millet has always been the principle food crop followed by sorghum and a type of bean known as *burusu*. This staple food has been supplemented by cassava,

⁴ See *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁵ See *Ibid.*, p. 136.

maize, simsim, groundnut, and a type of simsim called *kinu*. Around a Kakwa home, there is often, papaws, bananas, some lemons and *nyete* (special type of peas).

Millet, sorghum, *burusu*, and groundnuts were traditionally sown in one large field dug on communal basis. A practice known as *uya* and *lokita*. *Uya* is a communal service/activity organized to assist every member of the society especially the most disadvantaged groups or individual. It is normally a day, large scale, working groups of about 20-30 people clearing land for a family, normally for food or a live goat, and so forth. While, *Lokita* is a communal rotational service carried out by a group of people living together in the same area. In other words, it is a selective corporate working group to enhance ease in communal cultivation.

According to the research and relevant documentation, women in the past played equitable roles with men in the economy of the Kakwa. Men dug the fields, sowed the seeds, tended the animals, built and repaired the houses. On the other hand, women would remove the rubbish from cultivated fields, weed, harvest the crops, cut grass for thatching houses and fetching water. Besides they would also clean and store the crops in granaries. The women engaged actively in basket weaving, salt making and pottery.

Wealth among the Kakwa was/is measured in terms of how many granaries full of foodstuffs and the number of livestock in one's kraal. There has been also local trade among families neighbouring each other. The most common was barter trade where one can exchange labor for chicken or goat or any other good. The trade between different families was conducted in the atmosphere of understanding and free exchange of goods valued according to necessity.

Social organization

The Kakwa socially are organized according to *ketimito* or clans which are quite many as they keep breaking away from the original clans when they increase in number. Each *ketimi* has its taboos and prohibitions which are usually connected to respect of certain animals, birds, and specific species of trees or even certain forests. These prohibitions were to be strictly adhered to, otherwise it is believed that any violation can result in misfortunes for the members of the clan.

The clans, as is the case with many African societies, are exogamous in their marriage system. Kinship relation, therefore, is based on blood and marriage relationship. The Kakwa basically have a patrilineal system of descent.

The Kakwa society has been organized in too many groupings with the top most being the *guru'be*, (ethnic group/"tribe") as the main group to which all belong. The Kakwa as an ethnic group unite all its members by language, or expressed in action, hard work, and by willingness to protect their territory. Mention must be made that with the creation of the colonial boundaries, the then strong unity of the Kakwa of Sudan with those in Congo and Uganda was weakened.

The various groupings into which an individual Kakwa belonged are *ketimito*, with a chief as their leader. Quite often the clan is referred to by the chiefs name. After *Ketimi* we have *Lanye*, sub-clan. These are people who live around the same fire place and it implies that they come from the same grandparent. The fact of their unity is strengthened by living together. In addition, they have often an annual gathering called *tukaro* meaning togetherness by relatives. Lastly we have the family (*'bang*) as the smallest group.

The Kakwa have a special group which does not follow blood relationship called *Bura*. This is a religious group who meet together to perform religious and also ritual's ceremonies. These ceremonies include, rainmaking, purification of the big clan, if in case someone goes against a taboo or might have cut a prohibited

tree or killed an animal that should have not been killed. In such situations, they are called to officiate over the ritual prayer of chasing away sicknesses or any misfortune on members of the clan. Furthermore, the Kakwa have working groups called *lokita*. These groups normally are determined by people from the same location and their activities in the area. They are composed of kins living in the same area with the same age group. For example, youth of almost the same age would opt to cultivate, harvest, and weed together. This means that one day they would work for one person and the other day for the next one, and it goes on until the season is over. Usually, they share among themselves what they harvest and they work communally without prescribed pay.

In a nutshell, the Kakwa have a number of social organizations. All these organizations are interrelated with no contradictions. The smaller group serve the interest of the higher or bigger group and by these the higher respect and care for the smaller one. Our life as Kakwa people consists of actual objects or physical things as well as most importantly guidelines for group behavior, collective ideas, language, beliefs, and values. All these define the culture of a Kakwa without discrimination. A Kakwa in its intrinsic convention and invention divide of its culture embodies high value of respect to human life and the environment as manifested in their relationship with all the neighboring ethnicities.

