

## BAU PETROGLYPHS

By

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The location and distribution of bau boards carved on rocks might provide some valuable clues to the areas occupied or grazed over by the early inhabitants of Kenya. These petroglyphs might also throw some light on the obscure and confused picture of tribal migrations, before the Highlands were penetrated by Arab slave and ivory caravans or settled by Europeans.

The game itself is of very ancient origin, as it is recorded in Egypt as early as the Empire Age (1580-1150 B.C.) Except in the extreme north, it is known almost throughout Africa, while it is played throughout the Near and Middle East and in India, Ceylon, Indonesia, the Philippines and America. It is thought that the game spread from Arabia, with a secondary focus for Africa in the Sudan and possibly on the East Coast seaboard. It is natural that with so wide a distribution there are many variations in equipment and technique, which may have an important bearing on tribal affinities and migrations. As a general rule, the Bantu tribes of East and Central Africa use the four line board, while in some of the regions inhabited by the pastoral Nilo-Hamitic peoples the two line board is more generally found.

In areas occupied at present or in the recent past by the Kalenjin group of Nilo-Hamites, petroglyph boards have been reported in Sebei, Elgeyo, Tugen, Nyangori and Nandi country. All members of the group share a common name for the game, kechuiek, and the association of the game with a particular locality is perpetuated in place names, Kechui or Kapkechui. There are several such names in Nandi, although in some cases none of the present inhabitants can remember the particular spot where the game was traditionally played. Although these place names occur throughout Nandi, by far the largest number of them are found in the south-west, which is generally regarded as being the area originally settled by the tribe after their migration from Elgon. It is surprising that Huntingford lists Kapkechui as a kokwet tree, under which the social and judicial affairs of the surrounding country were settled. He is presumably referring to the fig tree in the Kapkechui koret near the Baraton Veterinary Centre. No stone board is to be found near the tree, which is in an area devoid of rocky outcrops, but the local tradition is that just before the turn of the century the Kablelach age group used to play in the shade of the tree on a four line board scooped out of the earth.

In three places in south-west Nandi there are boards carved on the surface of large, flattish rocks of granite or gneiss. Six similar petroglyphs have been recorded and there may be others, which have now been forgotten or which have either become covered with vegetation and debris, or weathered away beyond recognition. The best example is in a sheltered position at Chumbiri, - (the name is said to mean a place surrounded on all sides with steep banks) - in the Cheptinwich koret, which is situated a little to

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the north-east of Serem Market and to the south-east of Kaimosi Mission, (Fig. 1). The holes have been carved on a granite outcrop a few feet away from a large salt lick, where no doubt the warriors beguiled the hours playing on the warm rock, while they awaited their turn at the lick. The board consists of twentyfour holes arranged in two lines of twelve holes each. The lines are carved on a slight arc and on a gentle slope, so that the top holes are two or three inches above the bottom ones. Some of the holes are elliptical and some are round; some have very clear cut, sharp edges but others are very worn. The largest hole is 83 mm. long, 46 mm. wide and 29 mm. deep; the smallest is 40 mm. long, 30 mm. wide and faintly scooped out of the rock. On the same exposed surface are what appear to be other attempts to make a similar board. These may have been abandoned by imitators, when they found they could not produce a board resembling the model they were copying, or perhaps they were given up, because of faults which developed during the execution of the work, by the same people who made the full scale board.

Another two line petroglyph board with twentyfour holes is to be found near the Nandi Escarpment to the east of, and below, Kikirige Hill, which is better known as the Nandi Rock or by its Luo name of Godjajök, (Fig. 2). The holes at this site are rounder and much more worn than those at Chumbiri, presumably because the rock is much more exposed or because the board was more often used. The petroglyph is on a small rocky hillock, so situated that the warriors seated around it could observe both the stock grazing below them to the north and east, and also keep in touch with the look out man posted on the Nandi Rock to watch the plains below the south escarpment. It is likely that groups of warriors would assemble here more often than at the Chumbiri salt lick, to which stock would be driven at intervals of a fortnight or more. An interesting feature of this site is that, alongside the well made, evenly spaced two lines of holes, an attempt has been made to make a further two lines so as to convert the board to the four line pattern. The completed holes are large, badly finished and unevenly spaced, but the imitators abandoned their work before a complete board was made. At the present time, the petroglyph is not used by the local people, who have made their own four line board in the earth under a shady tree on the same hillock.

A third board has been carved on a rock below the Chemnaria Hill in south-west Nandi. This one, which is more roughly made than the other two, was either originally scooped out very faintly or it has become badly worn with the passage of time. It was completely hidden by vegetation when inspected by the writer.

Although there is insufficient information about petroglyph boards in other Kalenjin areas to allow of description or discussion, one example studied in Nyangori is of interest as it differs from those described in Nandi. The board is situated in a commanding position at Chemugong, east of Kapkerer Market and north of the Central Nyanza border. It covers an area of thirty by ten inches and is made up of 48 holes spaced equally over four lines. As the large rock on which the board is carved has been used for many years as a crushing base for cassava, the holes are so worn that they can no longer be used for their original purpose. An old

woman of about seventy years stated that the board was in use when she was a young girl and was there many years before she was born. As far as can be judged from its worn state, the Chemugong board was originally executed as a four line board and, as such, it is the only one of its kind to be recorded in areas now occupied by Nilo-Hamites. Four line petroglyphs have been described in the Bantu occupied areas of Uganda and Tanganyika, and it may be that this apparent exception from a Nilo-Hamitic country was the work of the Bantu to the west, many of whom were recruited as mercenaries by the Nyangori during their wars with the Nandi.

Some information on kechuiiek in Nandi can be gleaned from the early writers, some of whom mention the game as a tribal pastime. In 1902 Hobley noted: "The children play a sort of komari or bau with stones moved about among a number of small depressions in the ground: there are usually three rows of six such depressions in a row." It is difficult to understand the reference to three rows, a form which has been recorded only from Abyssinia, unless the tribal players were then in the process of changing over from the two to the four line game. It must be remembered, however, that Hobley had much less opportunity for observing the Nandi in their work and play than he had with their more peaceful and friendly Nyanza neighbours, and that when he travelled in Nandi there were always more important and urgent matters to claim his attention.

The implication that the Nandi did not go to the trouble of making wooden boards is corroborated by Hollis, who makes no mention of such boards in his very full catalogue of articles used by the tribe. He notes: "The almost universal game of bau is known, and is sometimes played by grown up people, but they do not use a board containing compartments like the Bantu tribes. Instead of this they make holes in the earth in which they circulate seeds. This game the Nandi call kechuiiek. As the Nandi had none of the wooden boards often described by travellers among the agricultural tribes, it is probable that the very few boards in use in Nandi to-day have been imported in comparatively recent times by Nandi returning home from service and travels outside the district.

The attitude of the Nandi to the game is typical of their mental make up, while their views on the origin of the petroglyphs illustrate their theories on the history of the Nandi Plateau. The elders say it was never a popular game with them or the warriors, as there were always much more important matters to claim their time or engross their thoughts. The younger men were fully occupied with military training in planning and executing raids, while the elders who were too old to go raiding sought solace and recreation round the social beer pot, and in looking at and discussing the cattle they and their warrior sons had accumulated. Women never indulged in kechuiiek as they had no time to spare from their arduous household duties. Although the children amused themselves with a variety of games, most of these had been designed not merely to pass the time, but rather to teach the coming generation to take its part in tribal life. As the majority of children's games made a direct appeal to the martial aggressiveness of the tribe, renown in these manly exercises was more sought after than any glory to be gained from proficiency in the art of circulating pebbles or sodom apple fruits among depressions

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in the ground. Altogether the inference is made that the Nandi, who have to a high degree the pastoral propensity for achieving contentment while doing nothing, consider that such a trifling game as kechuiiek would only appeal to people with very limited personal resources. It is not played regularly in the district even to-day, and the few who indulge in an occasional game are generally men and women who have travelled to the towns as soldiers, policemen, ayahs and so on.

Dorobo comment on the game, which has been recorded by Marker, has much in common with that of the Nandi: "We do not play as for the sake of the game we should forget to go hunting, and then we should have to go hungry with our families".

It is said that the Masai have come to identify the game with their preoccupation with stock, so that it is now regarded as a symbolic fight for cattle, in which the winner must take all his opponent's stock and instal them in his own kraal. The Nandi do not share this imaginative conception of a game, which to them is merely a somewhat unprofitable way of passing the time. In some respects this attitude is surprising as sodom apple fruits, which are often used instead of pebbles in kechuiiek, play an important part in several Nandi rites, have been accorded the name of 'cattle of the sodom apple', (tugap labotuet), and are used to represent stock in children's games. There is also no suspicion, such as disquieted the early missionaries in Uganda, that kechuiiek is played as a gambling game by the Nandi. Unlike some Uganda peoples, the Nandi do not consider a player's prowess at kechuiiek is indicative of his ability to settle disputes, nor that the petroglyphs play any part in rainmaking activities.

The Nandi have no very clear opinion as to who might have made the petroglyphs, but they are certain they are not the work of their ancestors. The nearest guess they can hazard is the one they make to all questions about the past which are now beyond their knowledge: 'It might have been the Sirikwa, or the Masai'. Similarly on the age of the petroglyphs, the invariable reply is: 'They have always been here.' Not only have the elders no idea how the holes were carved on the rocks, but even young men, who have travelled away from Nandi, can offer no intelligent guess as to the implement used or the technique employed. The old men say they have never seen the game played in any other way than on the four line board used by Nandi players to-day. As the petroglyph boards are all of the two line type, this seems to confirm the elders opinion that they are the work of another tribe. The rather amateur attempt to convert the Kikirige board from the two to the four line type may have been made by a Nandi warrior, who strove to copy the model before him, although the carving operation demanded a technique he had failed to master. The Baganda, when they make a board on soft sandstone, start the holes by sharp jabs with a hard, pointed stone and widen and deepen them by a rotatory movement with the same implement. It is uncertain whether this method, which allows a board to be made in an hour, would be successful with the harder rocks of the Nandi Plateau.

If the Nandi view that the boards were not made by ancestors of the tribe is accepted, the identity of the makers remains a

subject for hypothesis and conjecture. As it is generally accepted that the Nandi have lived in the south-west of the district since about the seventeenth, or at the latest the eighteenth century, the inference might be drawn that the petroglyphs were made before this time. To a layman's eye this does not seem possible, as the weathering of the holes is not consistent with exposure to the elements for as long as two or three centuries. The position of the boards adjoining a salt lick, overlooking grazing grounds and in touch with one of the tribal frontiers and cattle raiding areas suggests that the game was played to while away the time, when warriors were engaged on pursuits connected with the family herds. Before the Nandi climbed the south escarpment and occupied the rocky south west part of the district, it seems unlikely that cattle would have been herded in this area by another tribe. The nomad pastoralists, who wandered from time to time over the present northern grazing grounds of the Nandi, had ample pasture and sufficient salt licks on the plains, so that there was no reason why they should use the difficult, broken country across the Kibos Gorge.

The Sirikwa theory is especially interesting in view of the stone workmanship associated with the enclosures said to have been constructed by this tribe. The sites of the petroglyphs, however, are in areas where there are few, if any, of the traditional types of Sirikwa remains. Huntingford, who admittedly was more conversant with the north than the south of the district, has catalogued the probable Sirikwa antiquities, the large majority of which are in the northern and central parts of the country. No petroglyph is listed in his catalogue, and the only record of such a board in northern Nandi is that described by Mrs. Eve Bache, on her farm in Turbo district, as "a permanent Intoto board on the top of a great granite hill", which is called 'The Pig' on the Ordinance Map and which overlooks the Murugusi River. This board was of "twenty-four holes, side by side, in two lines of twelve, hollowed out in the granite in shallow cups". She infers that the game was played by the Masai on the farm, who were working there as herds. Although the farm has a Masai name, Olamusogai, the granite hill was an important look out post for Nandi warriors covering the Kipkarren Ford. Knowledge of the distribution of petroglyphs and of the origin and migrations of the Sirikwa is admittedly scanty, but it is doubtful if the makers of the earth and stone enclosures were also the carvers of the petroglyph boards.

The suggestion that the petroglyphs were the work of the Masai would also seem doubtful, since (with the exception of the Turbo specimen) the boards so far located are outside the area known to have been grazed over by this tribe. As the Masai play the two line game and are known, within recent times, to have made similar boards to those found in south west Nandi, it is conceivable that the Nandi specimens might have been carved by the Nilo-Hamitic precursors of both the Kalenjin and Masai groups. The fact that the Nandi to-day play the four line while the Masai have retained the two line version does not discredit this theory entirely, as the game was more of a tradition with the Masai than with the Nandi, who were also more open to change from outside influences. The Nandi carvings might possibly have been executed by immigrants to the district, who brought with them the game

they played in their homelands. But most of the tribes who provided the Nandi with recruits were either relatives, such as the Kipsigis, Geyo, Suk and Tugen, or Bantu, all of whom now play the four line game. The only peoples who might have played the two line game at the time they were assimilated with the Nandi were the Sirikwa and the Uasin Gishu Masai. Another conjecture is that they may have been the work of captured Masai, who sought consolation in the game while awaiting ransom. This would date the boards from about 1880 onwards, when the Nandi first began consistently to get the better of their traditional enemies, and would bring them within the period when work so strange and new to the Nandi would have been remembered by those who watched its execution. Finally, Wayland describes the Nubian game as being the two line variety, but with eight holes to each line. Although Nubian soldiers were stationed in Nandi almost permanently from 1895 to 1906, and ex soldiers were settled there towards the end of this period, none of the petroglyphs is very near any of the known K.A.R. camps or settlement villages. If the soldiers had played on boards they had carved for themselves on rocks, they would have been seen by the Nandi, who were ever watchful of the activities of the military, and the memory would have come down over the short space of sixty years.

Kapkechui very occasionally occurs as a personal name. When this is given as a nickname to an adult, it can be inferred that the recipient was an adept performer of the game. When given to a boy, it would indicate either that the child was born near one of the places where kechuiiek is played or, more likely, that he was born while his father was playing a quiet game with a friend to take his mind off the coming event.

There is more information in the early literature about the Masai version of kechuiiek, from which it is evident that as a tribe they were more addicted to the game than were the Nandi. In 1904 Hollis recorded: "The old men likewise have their game. This is played on a board containing many compartments, in which they circulate pebbles called n-doto. This game is called en-geshei. The warriors also play this game, but they do not care about it much. They have no boards and make holes in the earth." Merker states the game was invented, when he was an old man, by Sindilo, the son of Maitumbe and Ngaiterob, who is said to have been the first woman. This legend ascribes a most illustrious origin to the game, and suggests that en dodoi might be considered as the traditional tribal pastime of the Masai. Merker describes the Masai board as being the two line type, with three to five holes in each line. This form of the game is never played by women and only seldom by warriors, who prefer another version, called en gehe, in which pebbles or fruits are manipulated in turn by eight or more players in the forty to fifty holes in each of the two lines. This form, which is never played on boards but with hollows scooped in the ground, has evidently been developed to cater for groups of warriors when out with the herds or on picket duty. Merker also notes that the el Gargures section, who lived in an absolutely flat country, made a mound with earth and stones, on which a few sentries watched the herds and played en dodoi on a hollowed out rock to while away the time. In Kenya, Llewelyn Powys records that when he was managing a Rift Valley farm in the Gilgil District during the 1914-18 war, he would

"listen to the Masai lying on a shaded rock, whose smooth surface still bore upon it certain symmetrical markings scratched out, perhaps centuries before, by some indolent progenitor of the herdsman for the quaint game of forest checkers played with smooth stones."

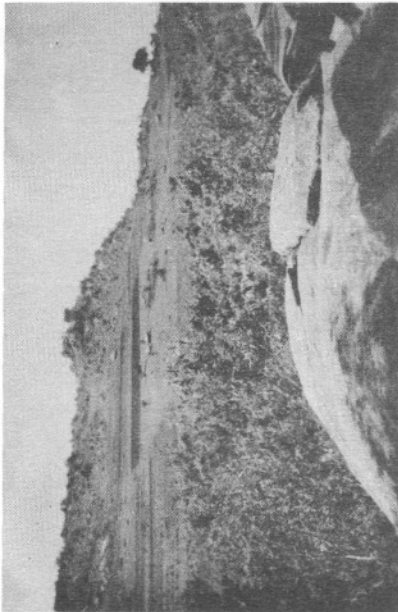
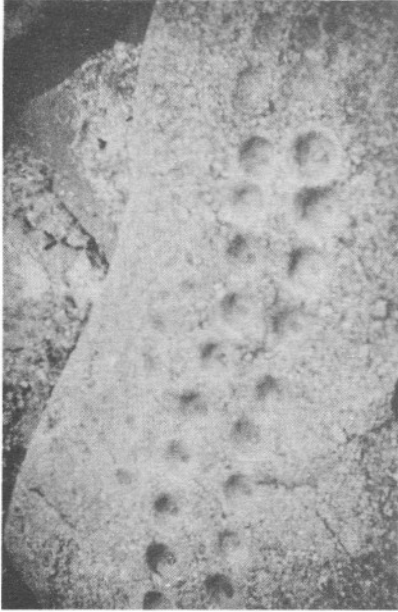
To sum up, there would seem to be some evidence that the two line game was played long ago by all the Nilo-Hamitic peoples, but that the Kalenjin branch changed to the four line version associated with the coast and those inland Bantu tribes who were unaffected by Masai influence. There appears to be no connection between the distribution of the petroglyphs and the known tribal migration and caravan routes, as only one somewhat doubtful specimen on the Nzoia crossing near Mumias has been recorded from near these routes. The balance of evidence is that the petroglyphs were the work of the Masai, who still make them and play on them, as boards have been found in places grazed over by the Masai as a tribe, occupied by them as a remnant or, in the case of the Mumias example, where they were employed as mercenaries. This tentative conclusion, however, does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the boards in south west Nandi, but these might have been executed by Nandi, who failed to pass on the technique to their successors, or they might be even older and represent the work of precursors of both the Kalenjin and Masai groups.

AUTHORITIES:

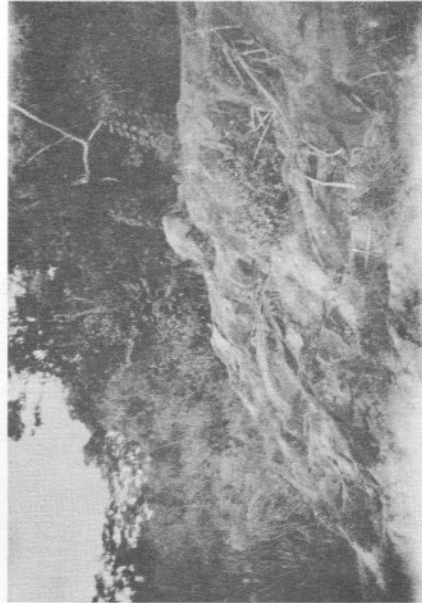
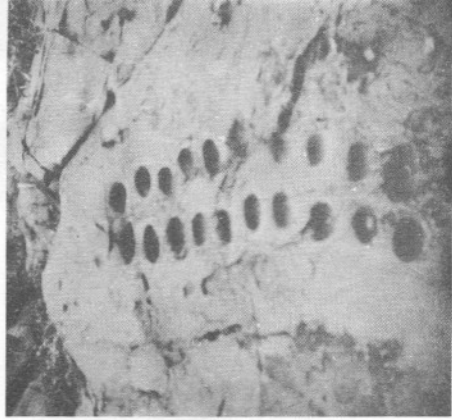
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- Uganda Journal 2 & 3 (Shackell); 4 (Wayland; Snoxall; Parry); 5 (Herskovits); 20 (Morris; Lanning); 21 (Matson).

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BAU PETROGLYPHS



KIKIRIGE. (Fig. 2)



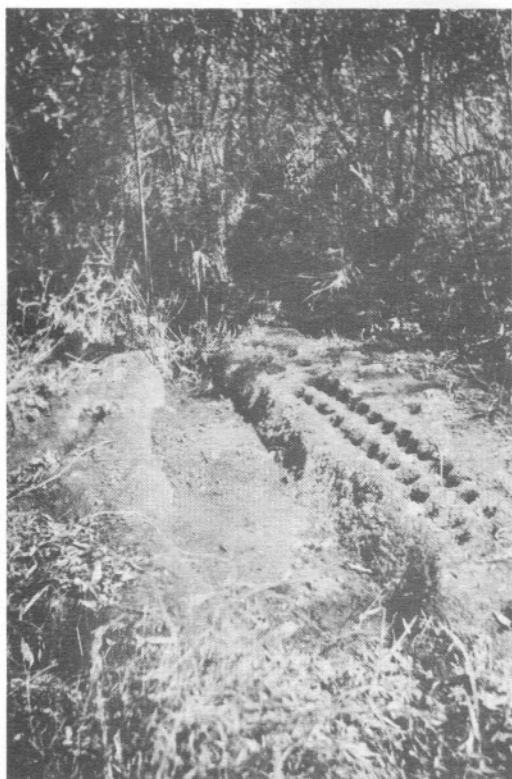
CHUMBIRI (Fig. I)



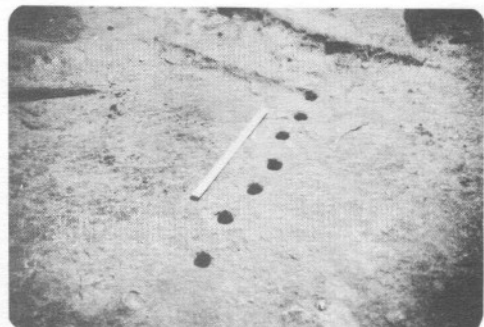
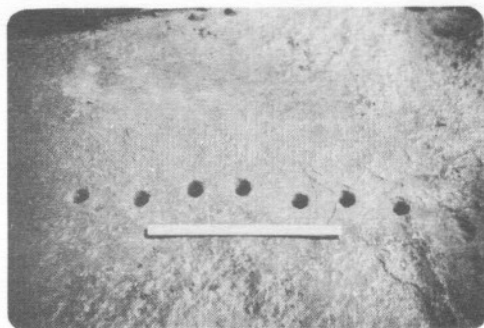
BAU PETROGLYPHS



Hole near Lanet Petroglyph made by Masai to collect rainwater which was used in preparation of courage medicine by war bands. Marks made by spear butts clearly seen.



Petroglyph Bau boards on Nderit Estate, Lanet.



Petroglyph on Nzoia River, Mumias.



X

to Uganda

Turbo

to Kitale

Eldoret

Baraton

Kapsabet

to Kakamega

Kaimosi Mission Serem

x Chumbiri

Nandi Hills

Kibos R.

Nyangori

Chemnaria Kikirige

to Songhor

KEY

- = (Kap) Kechui Kokwets
- X = Petroglyph Sites

BAU PETROGLYPHS