

TREES AND ANTHILLS: SONGS OF KARIMOJONG WOMEN'S GROUPS

by

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Karamoja District of north-eastern Uganda is a semi-arid plateau between 3,000 and 4,000 feet high. Most of its 9,230 square miles is covered with sparse savannah grassland or stunted acacia shrubs. Beside the dry, sandy river beds grow larger trees of the acacia family. Except for the areas of no-man's land between rival groups, the entire region suffers from over-grazing by cattle. In the settled areas even the largest trees have been hacked and hewn for firewood. For half the year the sun scorches the unprotected earth into the harness of concrete. When the rains come water flows quickly away before the soil can absorb it, and the rivers fill up in flash floods that sweep away even the tallest trees.

The inhabitants are Plains-Nilotes — Karimojong in the south, Jie in the centre and Dodos in the north. The men practise a trans-humant pastoralism, moving their herds according to the season. For half the year a young man may be away from his village as he wanders the periphery of the territory in search of water. Each group has an area of permanent settlement — a series of palisaded villages around which the women attempt to grow sorghum. From this they make the mainstays of their diet — beer (*ngagwe*) and a thick porridge (*atap*). If rainfall is adequate and falls at the right time, the harvest is reaped in July/August. More often the rains begin well but peter out just when they are most needed, and the partly-grown sorghum withers on its stalk. Of the last five harvests only one (1967) was sufficient to satisfy the needs of the people. In other years they have depended on famine relief.

Life in Karamoja is hard. During the thirty years before independence the entire area was a "closed district", shut off from the rest of Uganda and entered only by special permit. Even today, with the opening of new boreholes, schools and community centres, it remains the least developed part of the country. Traditional authority, vested in the elders and operated through a cyclical system of age and generation sets, is breaking down without being replaced by anything acceptable to the people. In recent years cattle-raiding has increased, both between the peoples of the district and as the result of incursions from the Turkana of Kenya and the Toposa and Didinga of the Sudan. Against this background of social insecurity and climatic uncertainty the people continue to live much as they did when the first British patrols visited them more than 70 years ago. The men wear only a cloth cape and refer contemptuously to officials as *ariang* — the "clothed ones". Adult women wear an ankle-length goatskin skirt behind, a skin apron in front and masses of coloured beads or metal rings around the neck according to marital status. Their hair is dressed with black soil and shaped into a mass of ringlets that hang down all round the head.

Apart from a few comments by explorers, missionaries and officials, little has been written of their music. Like many Plains-Nilotic pastoralists, the Karimojong use no drums and have few other musical instruments, thereby giving the impression in the more developed parts of Uganda that they are "unmusical". In fact they have one of the most developed traditional musical cultures still in existence. (How long it will survive in the face of 'progress' is another matter!). The idea of professional musicians is alien to this egalitarian society in which *every* man is a musician, the proud 'owner' (*elope*) of two or more ox-songs which he claims as his own compositions and which he

alone has the right to sing accompanied by his intimate friends. Communal traditional music, performed in conjunction with major ceremonies, is characterised by impressive sweeps of melody from a hundred or more voices. Each male age group has songs in praise of its "emblem" (usually an animal). Women have their own groups which, in alternate generations, are associated with Trees and Anthills.

Little is known of the Groups themselves. Neither of the two anthropologists who have studied the peoples of Karamoja (Gulliver 1955, Dyson-Hudson 1966) mentions their existence, and were it not for the Groups' songs they might even now be unknown. Presumably they are the counterparts of the men's age groups, but their precise purpose is no longer clear. The only public ceremony at which women appeared by groups was the *akiwudakin a ngaatuk* — the 'annual' gathering of the cattle before dispersing to dry-season pastures — a custom now rarely observed, though the people still speak of it as if it were an everyday occurrence.

Admission to a Group is by consent of the elders. Girls or young women are not automatically entitled to membership but have to undergo a ceremony lasting a week to 10 days. During this time they identify themselves (*akior*) with the natural object chosen as their emblem. Beyond this it was impossible to obtain any information. It is possible that, under present circumstances, ceremonies are no longer held, though a young man remembered attending one with his mother when he was a small child. In fact young men are allowed to join, and remain members even after they have been initiated into a male age group.

The two major emblems are the *amoni* (thicket), more especially the *edrukoit* tree (*Acacia albida* Del.) and the tall, columnar anthill (*akomomua*). The survival of other emblems in Children's Songs suggests that the system was once more complex than it is today. The connection of these emblems with trees or anthills is not always clear. The choice of sisal (*amoyo*) as emblem may follow from its association with trees in building houses, which is women's work. But the use of *aribo* — the time when a cloud passes over the sun — is obscure, unless it relates to the women's part in rain-beseeking. Among Dodos women, 200 miles north of the Karimojong, there is a Hyrax Group (*Ngadukae*), which is linked with trees in that the animal is "at home in the hill thickets."

If official opportunities for public performance are few today, women sing songs of their Group on the least incentive. Provide a number of them with a large gourd of beer, and they will begin at once. A group of women from Namalu in southern Karamoja who were attending a course at the District Farm Institute arrived for church service in an open lorry, singing so vociferously that they could be heard half-a-mile away. Two days later the same group entered Moroto, the District Administrative Centre, in the same manner and had to be restrained lest their exuberance become a public nuisance. Whenever two or three are gathered together, in the fields or the homestead, walking through the bush or gathering firewood, the songs of their Group are overwhelmingly popular. Today their performance is as public as the ceremonies with which they were originally associated remain private. Nor are they restricted to members of the Group alone. Everyone knows the words of the choruses. An old woman, however, following traditional etiquette, considered it proper for an Anthill song to be recorded by her daughter as she herself was a Tree.

Textually songs are difficult to translate, not only because words and phrases have probably been lost but, because of the expressions used, much of the poetry is lost in necessary periphrasis. Tree songs have an obvious theme — the unity of the Group, as suggested by the imagery of intertwining branches:

The tall tree with drooping, intertwined branches —
The tree that is likely to fall indeed —
has fallen into another tree.

The trees are tied thickly together
as the horns of an ox are tied¹,
the trees on the banks of the river.

The impenetrable thicket with branches intertwined . . .
The dark thicket is intertwined and moves as one,
It keeps thickly together.

The unity of the Group — or rather, of groups of the same emblem — is stressed by the emphasis on “friends” (*ngakonei*) i.e., members of the Group in other parts of the country, and the places where they live:

Yes, there are friends at Kakorisa,
friends at Lodipan,
there are friends at Ocoricom,
friends at Kakomongole,

additional names being substituted apparently *ad infinitum* in accordance with traditional practice.

Identity between women and emblem is apparent when group “friends” are sung about as if they actually were trees:

Collect for me²
the friends who can be collected,
Split for me²
the friends who can be split;
Cut for me
the friends who can be cut;
Hew for me
the friends who can be hewn.

If any doubt remains, women members of the group are enumerated by name:

I have tied my friend
my friend Kiyo,
mother of Angoriabong³
wife of Apalotaruk.

The tree with intertwining branches
is the tree of Mongino’s mother,
of Nawalio’s mother,
of Lomilo’s mother, etc.

It is typical of Karimojong thought — the same relation occurs between a man and his ox — that they see no contradiction between a woman being identified with a tree one moment, while at the next she is separate from it to the extent of being its ‘owner’.

If the Group is uni-sexual, it is not isolated from the community. In praising the thicket as:

Refuge of animals,
Refuge of the bush-duiker,
Refuge of the hare,
Refuge of lions,
Refuge of the monkey,

and naming places where it (i.e. other Groups) can be found:

¹ It is traditional practice for the horns of a young ox to be tied with a leather strap so that they grow to a special shape. (See Note 4)

² The verb *akinapakin* is used for putting twigs, firewood, etc. together in a neat pile. *Akici* refers to the splitting of a piece of wood (or sisal) lengthways.

³ A man’s ox-name, the ox in question being white in colour like the cattle egret (*ebong*) with dark-brown (*ngori*) patches on its body.

There is a thicket at Kodokei,
 There is one at Lomanakelele,
 the women add:
 We share the thicket with friends,
 Share it with our menfolk,
 the fathers of Colong⁴,
 fathers of Lokudusia,
 the fathers of Gerer.

At the same time they combine the poetic with the practical:
 The dark tree that has grown out of the swamp,
 the *egirigiroi* tree⁵
 is used for fencing the cattle kraal.
 Loriono can use it for fencing
 the cattle kraal of Lokalama's father⁶.

The trees used for building are themselves scenes of building activity:
 O yes, they are building on high,
 The starling is building,
 The kite is building,
 The eagle's nest hangs suspended,
 The dove's nest hangs suspended;

The song continues, regardless of ornithological accuracy. One bird's name is substituted for another, one tree for another — the names of 12 different trees and nearly as many varieties of birds appearing in successive songs.

Finally, the women assert their ownership. Like the men who warn others against killing their emblem — "Do not kill the elephant; it is not your animal" — women maintain their 'rights':

I say to you — Don't cut down the trees, my friend.
 I tell you — Don't cut them down.
 They are our trees to cut⁷.

Anthills offer fewer possibilities. Praised as "the chosen one", i.e. the one selected as emblem, an anthill has none of the symbolism⁸ offered by intertwining branches. Its function is utilitarian — to provide the white ants which are eaten as a delicacy and to obtain which it is essential to rise early and cover the anthill. Hence the name *akimuko a kejamu* — "that which is often covered with a hide", and the main theme:

I will cover it tonight.
 I will cover it later.
 I will cover that which is held in common.

As with trees, women are identified with anthills, so that it is impossible to tell which is meant:

I will cover the friends (i.e. anthills),
 yet the names of 23 past or present women group members follow.

Birds act as mediators between the groups. Where the tree is the scene of nest-building, the anthill "makes the birds wake up", i.e. the women must get up early ("We are

⁴ The owner of an ox is referred to as its 'father' (*Apa*). *Colong* — the name given to an ox whose horns have been trained to grow into a shape like the legs of a stool (*akicolong*). *Lokudusia* — an ox with horns bent towards the eyes (*kudo*), and black and white hairs on the ears (*esia*). *Gerer* — an ox with very many spots; *akiger* — to cicatrise.

⁵ *Egirigiroi* — *Acacia campylacantha*. Hechst. ex A. Rich.

⁶ *Lokalama's father*: for 'father' see Note 4. *Kalama* — name given to an ox that is tall and long-legged.

⁷ *Ayepi aiong*: lit. "I will cut them." The remark is to be interpreted as an assertion of ownership rather than a literal declaration. The singer has no intention of cutting down the trees.

⁸ The choice of the tall columnar anthill in preference to the rounded *etipu* and its association by alternate generations with trees provides obvious scope for Freudians in search of phallic symbols. The question is too complex to be covered in a brief note. Even if the universality of such symbolism is accepted and the women's choice attributed to penis-envy, what is one to say of men who simultaneously praise the elephant as their emblem yet identify themselves with a castrated animal, the ox? Neither Evans-Pritchard's (1956) nor Beidelman's (1966) hypotheses are satisfactory; both are concerned with oxen in a ritual context; Karimojong "identification" is essentially social.

the early-risers of the grey-one") if they wish to collect the ants. As with trees women assert their rights, though somewhat obliquely:

Where a new one grows, another family says —
There is something in the path;

i.e. non-Anthill people must avoid that to which they are not entitled.

Except when walking or working, songs are sung seated, the performers adopting whatever relaxed posture they find convenient. In the absence of professional singers, one of the women, perhaps, though not necessarily, the most senior (or simply one who can judge a pitch level suited to the group) begins the first solo. This is not the actual song but an *Akiwar* to it. Short introductory or concluding pieces of this type are associated with groups of songs rather than on a one-to-one basis. Insofar as they are long enough to have a theme, it is related to the song that follows. Tree songs are introduced by:

The man who fells trees has gone.
He is worn out.
or Yes, there are friends
at the River Omanimani⁹,

the remainder being meaningless vocables — *Lelo lelo* or *Aiwoye*.

On completion of the *akiwar* there is a pause. The soloist then begins it a second time and, on completion of the chorus, again waits. She may either begin a third repetition or, satisfied that no one else wishes to sing, start the first solo of the song proper. This process is repeated after each song as a means of leading to the next, either from the song leader or another member of the Group. In theory any member of the Group can put a stop to the song at any point by launching into an *akiwar*. It is, in fact, apart from physical exhaustion, the only method of ending the otherwise endless stream of solos and choruses. In practice the *akiwar* is only introduced at the end of a chorus, either by the original song leader or by a woman who wishes to start the next song.

For the song itself there is a series of soloists rather than a permanent leader. Any woman wishing to sing calls out "*Kililing*" — "Be quiet!" — at the conclusion of a solo and, when the chorus is completed, starts the next solo herself, confident that her request will be carried out. So ingrained is this habit that when, during a recording session, I called out this instruction to a group of noisy children, the soloist automatically changed over! Competitive as they are forced to be in their struggle to grow crops or to retain their husband's affection, women follow a "fair shares" policy in singing. Even the oldest, who have passed beyond the days of authority, are allowed their turn, their fellow members indicating with a gesture of the hand the position of the soloist so that the microphone could be brought closer to catch the weak and wavering voices.

Women use a low pitch in singing. The songs transcribed range from 210 cps (G sharp₃—19 cents) to 480 cps (B₄—49) but the choruses are never higher than 432 cps (A₄—32). Forceful use of the lower register produces a strident tone. Lack of plosive or nasal consonants in Akarimojong enables singers to keep their lips apart, most vocal movement being in the back. In the first *akiwar*, for example (No. 1), the lips meet once only for the soloist's 'p' of *Lodipan*; the entire chorus is sung without the lips coming together, though the tongue moves vigorously on a series of successive 'L's'. Despite the strident tone and great volume, voice production is relaxed and seemingly effortless. The women give the impression that they could go on for hours — as indeed they do — and are then ready to start all over again!

The keynote to all songs is simplicity — in construction, melody and rhythm. To say that songs are "simple" is not to imply that they are crude or naive. At its best, as here, the simple can become the beautiful¹⁰. Structurally each of the songs presented

⁹ Other place names may, of course, be inserted.

¹⁰ The Karimojong apply the words *ebus* — beauty, and *ebusan* — beautiful, to songs, though never to singers. A good performance is only *ejok* — good, or *ejok nooi* — very good. The highest praise is reserved for the song itself.

comprises a one-phrase solo followed by a one-phrase chorus. With the two *akiwar* (Nos. 1 and 3) this completes the item, though, as just described, the entire process may be repeated. In the songs solo and chorus follow each other alternately, sometimes overlapping by one tone, sometimes not. The chorus remains constant, solos vary with each new set of words, or a verse previously sung may be repeated. Although only three solos are given for Song No. 3, in one recording there were as many as 36, 22 of which were different, shared between three soloists.

Tonally, although the complete song may use from four to eight tones, no separate solo or chorus uses more than four (the third solo of No. 4 and the first of No. 5 use only three). The two *akiwar* items are "simplest" in that they contain no minor seconds (111 cents in two cases). In Kolinski's classification (1961) both solo and chorus are pentatypic, while No. 2 is hexatypic throughout; No. 4 has a pentatypic chorus but only one solo of this type, and of No. 5's four solos and two choruses, only one is of the simpler kind.

Melodically the songs show sweeping movement. The chorus of the first *akiwar* soars slowly and splendidly upward, increasing in intensity, then falls away and diminishes. The choruses of Nos. 2 and 4 are a series of waves that rise, dip and return to the tonal centre. The impression is reinforced when the songs are sung in full and these surges of melody from thirty powerful voices are interspersed with the (by comparison) small voice of the soloist, asserting itself, at times in a lesser wave (Solo 1 in Nos. 4 and 5), more often in a falling cadence. From a distance the voice of the soloist is lost and one is left with a melody surging out of the void.

If this were not enough to catch the ear, all songs (though not the *akiwar*) have strongly accentuated and regularly spaced beats. The concluding part of the chorus in No. 5, which is sung on one tone, owes its effect entirely to rhythm, when the dominant triple time established by solo and chorus, who 'hit' the first of each three with the deliberate emphasis of a woman hammering skins, suddenly shifts to equally emphatic attack on an off-beat, and concludes by giving equal duration, if not stress, to the last two tones. When rhythmic "attack" combines with melodic zest, as in Nos. 2 and 4 (the former uses handclapping to make assurance doubly sure), the result is "impact"! The song hits one as a gesture of defiance against the rains that will not come and men who still suffer from the illusion that they are superior — a gesture made all the more effective by the simple melodic line and the fact that its protagonists are sitting or lolling on the ground in the most unprofessional of singing postures, as if they had not a care in the world.

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No.1 Akiwar to SONGS OF KARIMOJA WOMEN'S GROUPS.

No. 2. $\text{♩} = 192$



S: Ai- o- ye ke- lo- (to) nya- ke- ye- pa' ki- le- le- nye



C: Ai- o- ye- e- ye- e- ye- e

No. 2 $\text{♩} = 264$

S: (Silent or join Chorus)

1. E- lo- ri e- lo- ri

Handclap



C: Ai- e- ye e- lo- ri nya- ki- lo- ro e- ye.

Chorus Solo



2. Nye- ki- pe- ta nya- go- lo' 3: E- lo- ri na- pa- e C Ai- 4: Na- pa- e- ka- a- ka ki- yo

No. 3 $\text{♩} = 152$



Akiwar to No. 4 $\text{♩} = 136$

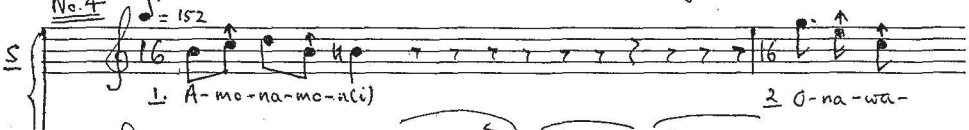
S: Le- lo le- e- lo Lo- di- pa- ni ga- ko- ne. i



C: A- le- to le- e- lo le- lo- o- o ye- e

No. 4 $\text{♩} = 152$

S: 1. A- mo- na- mo- ni 3 O- na- wa-



C: A- mo- no- o o- ye- ya a- mo- ni

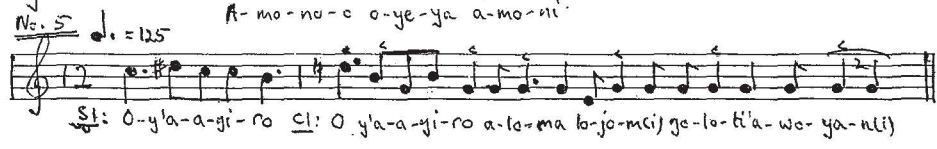
S: ti- a- yi- a Alt. 1. A- mo- na- mo- ni) etc.



C: etc. etc.

No. 5 $\text{♩} = 125$

S: O- ya- a- yi- ro C: O ya- a- yi- ro a- la- ma lo- jo- mi) ge- lo- ti- a- wo- ya- ni)



S2: E-gi-ri-gi-roi-a
 e2, A-wae-t(a) a-nya-wi-a a-la-ma lo-je-m(e) go-lo-t'a-wo-ya-n(i)

Other Solos followed by C2

S3: E-ka-pe-li-me-n(e) S4: E-nye-la-ma-i-t(i)

Notes

① Transposition of Tonal Centre (C) and degree of deviation in cents.

No. 1: 710u, C, S, -24, -10, -10

No. 2: 547u, C, S, -15, -11, -15, +2

No. 3: 726u, C, S, +12, -8, -26

No. 4: 1198u, C, S, -27, +3/-25, -16, -22/-11, -27

No. 5: 534u, C, S, +15, -8, +13, +30, +35, +15

② Shadow vowels (as sung) in brackets.

③ Signs ↑ = 50 cents up, ↓ = 50 cents down, glide

④ Figure at the beginning of phrase indicates its length in ♩ (for No. 5 ♩.)

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OBITUARY

PROFESSOR PERCIVAL R. KIRBY, M.A., D.LITT., F.R.C.M., D.MUS. HON.

Professor Kirby came to South Africa from Britain in 1914 to be Inspector of Music in Natal. He was one of the earliest musicologists to take a special interest in African music. As Professor of Music at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, he undertook several journeys into the country in the early 1930's to study the indigenous musics of South Africa under the auspices of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. As a result of these tours numerous articles and the first important work on South African music appeared. "The Musical Instruments of the Native Races of Southern Africa". It has been printed in several editions, the first of which was issued in 1934 by the Oxford University Press. Together with the photographs by W. P. Paff his collaborator, this book has been a constant and important work of reference for students of the more southerly music and musical instruments of Africa. Professor Kirby was well-known as a lecturer on this subject both in Africa and overseas. He died on February 7th, 1970, at the age of 83.