

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RFG - 17
Sonjo Tribe
I - The Old Way of Life

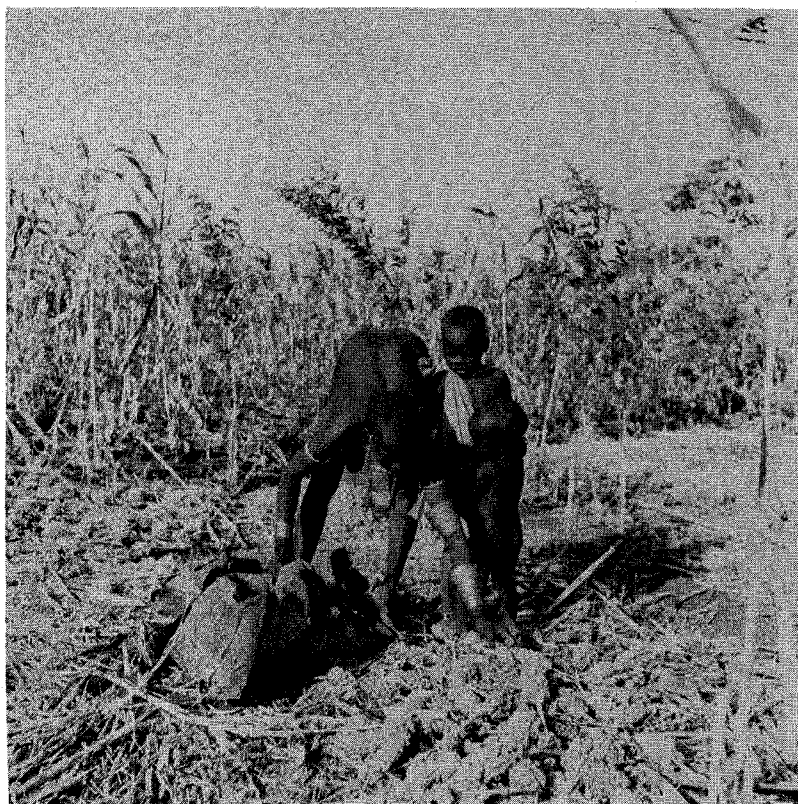
c/o Barclays Bank
Arusha, Tanganyika
December 10, 1955

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Many of the customs and material possessions of the Sonjo are similar to those found in other tribes of East or Central Africa, but their extreme isolation over a long period has marked the tribe with some of the characteristics of an island community. Their isolation from other Bantu tribes was brought about by the incursion of the Masai from the north. For several centuries the Sonjo have been surrounded by these hostile, predatory nomads whose customs and ideals are quite different from theirs. Lacking the stimulation of friendly intercourse with other peoples, the Sonjo have remained archaic. Confined to the small valleys which constitute their country, and confronted on all sides with a formidable enemy, they developed specialized methods for the exploitation of the land, an efficient system of defense, and a strong sense of solidarity which is expressed mainly through religious beliefs and practices. Only within the last generation have they been appreciably affected by the outside world. The first government officers to appear in the country were welcomed; they

brought relief from the pressure of Masai raids. Later they felt the discomfort of strict discipline under their German rulers, and when they thought of resisting they learned the power of modern arms. British rule, which has only become effective in this region in recent years, was milder and obsessed with the mission of improving their lot, even against their own desires--raising their standards of living and educating them. Not much has been accomplished as yet. The Sonjo still cling tenaciously to their old ways, but the thin edge of civilization has entered their land and threatens to pry them away. In this letter I intend to describe in outline the old ways, most of which are still followed. In a later letter I shall tell something



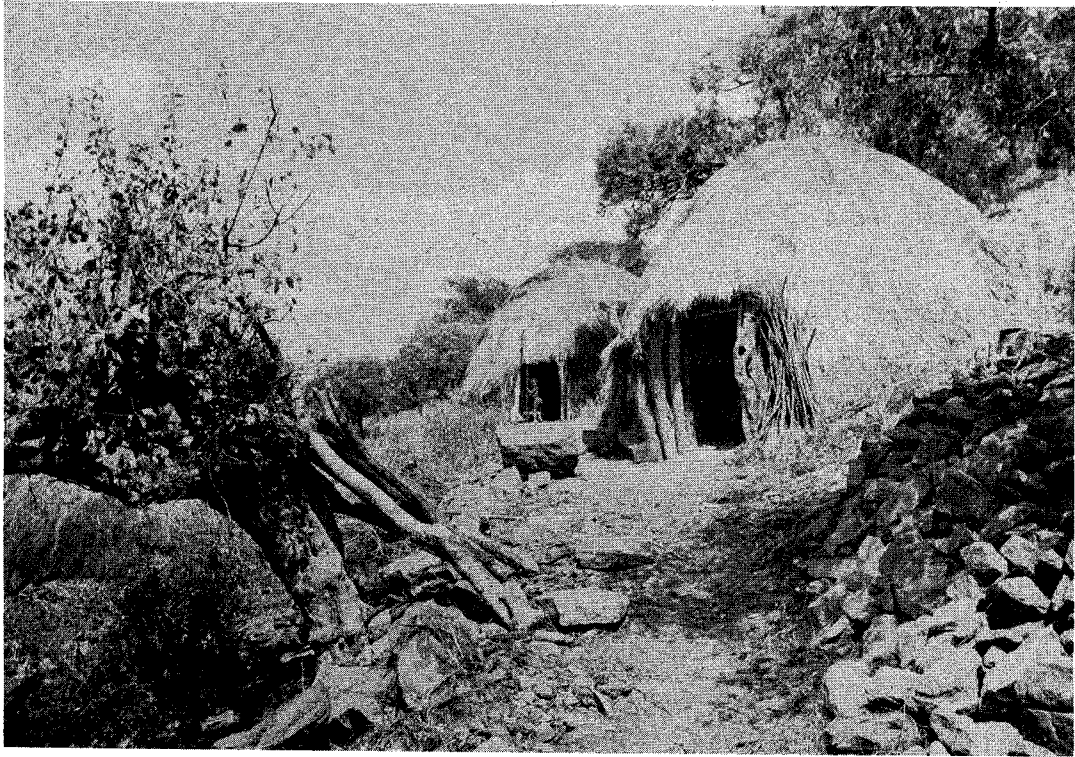
Sonjo Mother Harvesting Sorghum

about modern changes in Sonjo culture.

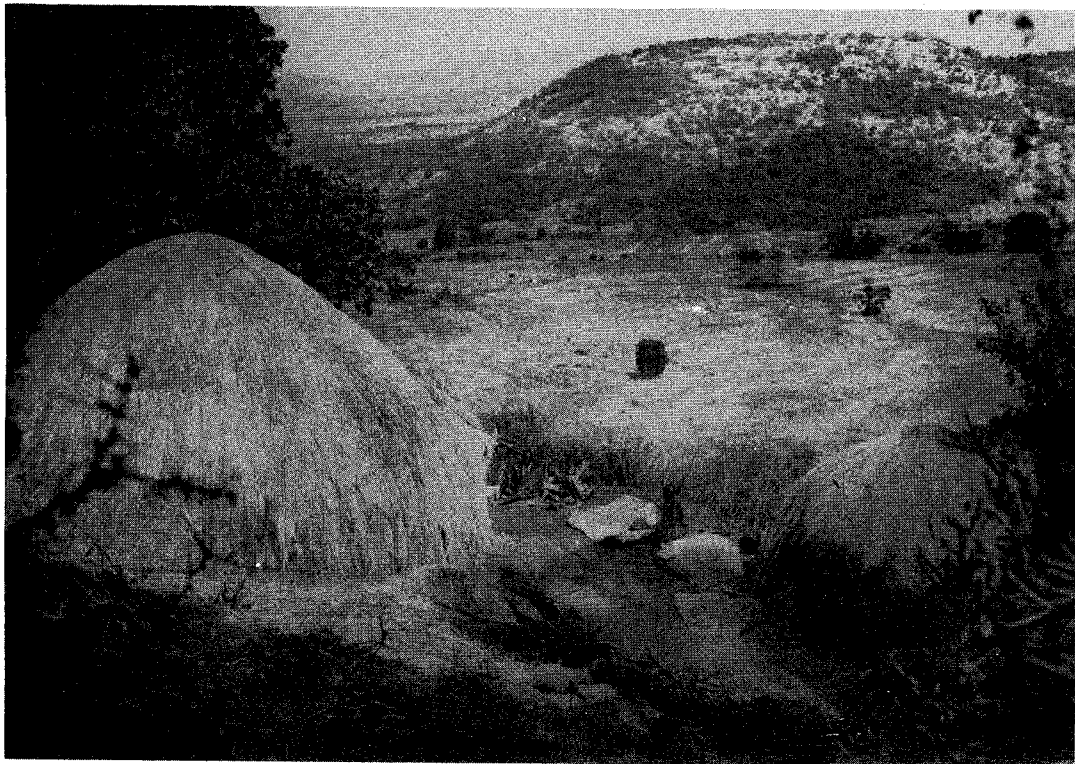
In the elevated, broken plateau of northern Masai District in Tanganyika, there is a shallow depression some twenty miles across which is itself nearly 5,000 feet in altitude. This depression, which is thirty miles west of Lake Natron and an equal distance from the Kenya border, is the home of the Sonjo, whose six villages are located in watered valleys around the perimeter of the depression. Each village has a population of 300 or 700 people. Four of them are located on a ten-mile line along the northern boundary of the country. Our camp is situated between two adjacent villages at the center of this line. Although I have visited the other two villages which are 12 and 16 miles away respectively, most of my information comes from the four nearby villages. One of the villages which is three miles from our camp, Kisangiro, possesses the principal temple of the tribal god and enjoys a higher ritual status than the others. Kisangiro is the stronghold of tradition. It is the only village which has refused to accept a "bush school." Until a few years ago no cloth could be worn in the village, only skin garments were allowed. The section of the village in which the temple is located is taboo for foreigners; even natives cannot enter it unless they are wearing skins. On an early visit to Kisangiro we unwittingly walked into the temple precincts and caused a furor among the elders which has not been forgotten. The people are secretive and unfriendly to strangers, and most of my information about Kisangiro comes from informants from other villages.

Rainfall records, which have been kept at Sonjo for eight years, show a range of from 12 to 33 inches a year. The average for the eight years is 18.75 inches. Under prevailing climatic conditions this is hardly enough for growing rain crops, and without irrigation the land could only be used for pasture. Each of the Sonjo villages makes use of a stream to irrigate its valley. In four of the villages the streams are formed by local springs, which have religious significance. A village has two sets of fields: the black valley bottom soil is cultivated by irrigation during the dry season, while the sandy soil on the slope of the valley is cultivated during the rainy season with supplementary irrigation in all but very wet years. Sorghum and sweet potatoes are the main crops, followed by several kinds of legumes.

Agriculture is carried on by the women of the tribe who employ digging-sticks as their only cultivating tool. These are stout hardwood sticks four or five feet long and sharpened at one end to a flat point. A digging-stick is grasped with one hand near the point and with the body sharply flexed at the hips it is plunged into the ground, the other hand being used to move the clod of loosened soil. This is slow back-breaking work. Each married man owns several plots in the valley bottom and on the slope. The agriculture cycle starts with removing the stubble of last year's crop. First the field is soaked with water from a furrow, then the stubble is uprooted by the men of the family. After that the women take over and dig up the field to prepare a seed bed. This is usually done by working parties of from ten to twenty women who cultivate the fields of each member in turn. These women form a line and sing as they work through a field, wielding their digging-sticks in rhythm. The planting of seeds and the cultivating and weeding of the growing crop is done by each woman in her own fields, usually with the help of other women and girls of her family. Harvesting is also the work of



Sonjo Houses on Rocky Hillside



Cultivated Valley from Samunge Village

women. After the initial clearing of the fields, the participation of men in agriculture is limited to flooding their fields from the irrigation ditches several times a month. Field work of some kind is carried on during the whole year. As soon as the rain crop has been harvested it is time to cultivate and plant the valley-bottom fields.

The traditional livestock of the Sonjo consists of goats and, in smaller numbers, sheep. Cattle raising, which is now carried on in three of the villages, is a recent introduction and not yet well integrated into the culture. I shall mention cattle again later in discussing modern changes. Even the poorest men own a few goats, and most men have flocks of upwards of fifty animals. A few wealthy men in each village possess four or five hundred goats each. Most owners divide their goats into two herds: the kids and lambs and some of the female animals in milk are kept in the village, the rest of the animals are kept at goat camps which may be four or five miles distance in the bush. The task of herding the flocks falls to the uncircumcised boys. Older boys live at the goat camps, while the village flock is tended by small boys and also girls. Older men and women occasionally help with the herding, but young men of the warrior classes are exempt from this work except in emergencies.

Wild honey is regarded by the Sonjo as an important item in their economy as it provides their only alcoholic drink--a fermented hydromel or mead. Hives are made from lengths of logs which are split and hollowed out, then fitted together again and placed in trees in the hope of attracting swarms of wild bees. A prosperous elder usually owns twenty or thirty hives which are placed in trees in the village or in the forest. The making of a hive involves considerable work, and they are valued as an important form of inheritable wealth.

The standard weapon of the Sonjo is the bow and arrow. The bows are long and stout with pulls which I estimate at from fifty to ninety pounds. The arrows, feathered in the usual European manner, are tipped with detachable iron points which are always poisoned. Bows and arrows are used for hunting and in defending goats against attacks by leopards and hyenas. In the old days they were used as weapons of war, inspiring a healthy respect in Masai warriors.

The economic activities of the Sonjo are related to and regulated by their social organization, and both the economic and social aspects of their life are sanctioned by religious beliefs. The central institution in the structure of a Sonjo village is a board of elders who have special rights over irrigation water. Membership on these boards is passed from father to son; it is believed that the original members were the founders of the village. The ten to fifteen members of a village water board come together at frequent meetings to discuss the distribution of irrigation water and village affairs. They have the power of refusing water to any man who disregards their orders. This penalty amounts to virtual expulsion from the village and provides the board with a powerful sanction for ruling the village and functioning as a court of law.

In addition to the water board, each village has a group of junior water elders who have special rights to the use of water but no ruling powers. These positions are also inherited. Below the junior water elders are a class

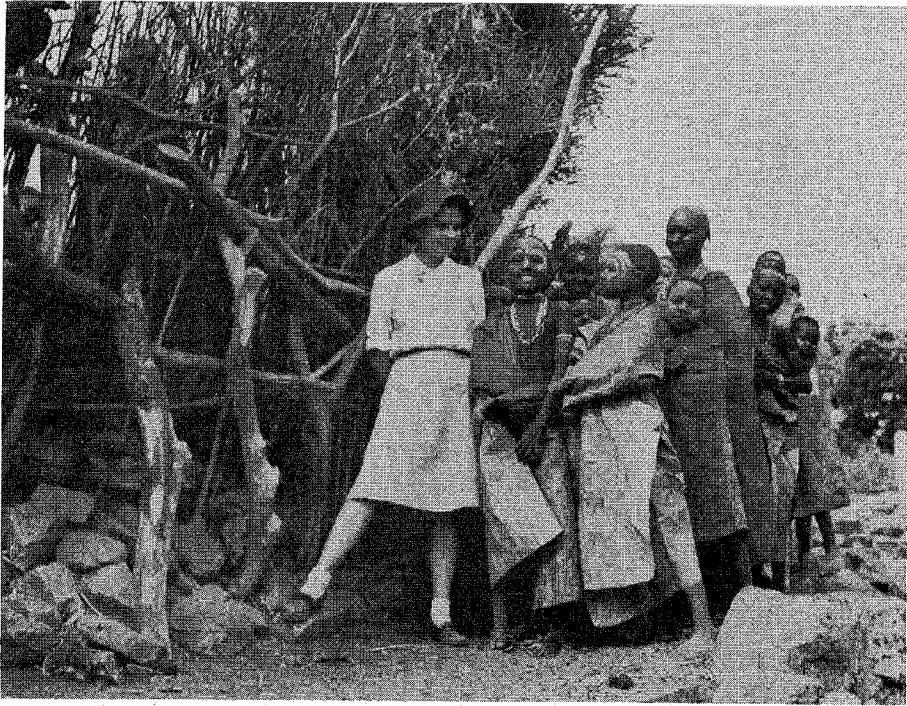
of substantial elders called wakiama who pay regular tribute to the water board and are entitled to the regular use of irrigation water. The rest of the population--well over half of the village--must attach themselves as clients to elders possessing water rights and request water which is left over. The day is divided into four six-hour periods for the purpose of water use, two in the daytime and two at night. Each elder is granted a full period for using water about twice a month. Only a part of this period is usually needed for soaking his fields; for the rest of the time the water can be used by his clients, who are expected to give him a small fee or present for this privilege.

A village is divided into three or four wards, each occupied by a different patrilineal clan. Membership on the water board is quite equally distributed among the different clans. The water elders of any clan act as clan leaders, represent their ward at meetings of the water board, and are responsible for carrying out rulings of the board which affect their clan. When a water elder dies, the ceremony of inducting his successor, which involves an initiation fee of thirty goats, concerns only the elders of the initiate's own clan, not the whole board. In those villages where the water supply comes from several springs, each spring is associated virtually with one clan. The members of a clan hold sacrifices and other ceremonial meetings there.

The Sonjo villages are built on the slopes of rather steep hills or ridges. These sites were originally selected as defensive positions and were surrounded with dense thickets of thorn and euphorbia bushes. House sites were laboriously excavated from the rocky hillsides and are regarded as valuable possessions of a clan. Clans are subdivided into lineages whose members occupy different neighborhoods of the ward. According to Sonjo marriage customs, the clans are exogamous, but villages tend to be endogamous. This means that brothers with the same father live in one ward of a village, but their sisters after marriage live in different wards of the village. A girl's first marriage is expected to be within her father's village, but subsequent marriages after divorce may be, and often are, with men in different villages.

Girls are commonly betrothed in childhood. The bride-price--currently ranging from 60 to 200 goats--which is paid at that time is contributed partly by the fiance's father and partly by other members of his lineage. The father of the bride distributes the goats to his lineage brothers, but keeps about a third of them himself. This transaction is final; there is never a repayment of the bride-price under any circumstances. If a betrothed girl dies before marriage, her bride-price is a complete loss. Another payment of goats is made at the time of the actual marriage, but this involves a comparatively small sum.

Although boys were often affianced as children, they could not marry until they reach the rank of elder, but nowadays senior warriors are allowed to marry. A tribal initiation is held every six years. At that time the boys are circumcised and enter the rank of junior warrior, the junior warriors graduate to senior warriors, and senior warriors become elders. Boys are circumcised at the age of eight to fifteen, and there is an age spread of about six years among the members of any one warrior class. The age of young men at marriage seems to be more uniform; younger members of a class tend to wait



Betty with Group of Initiated Girls



Young Herdsman at Goat Camp

a few years longer after becoming senior warrior before they marry. Girls undergo an operation analogous to circumcision at about the same age and during the same year as boys. Thereafter their social status changes and they are no longer allowed to play freely with boys. There is no formal organization of girls who are initiated together and no special bond between them and the boys who were initiated the same year. A man regards the children of his initiation mates in some ways as his own children, and is not allowed to marry them, but there is no ban against marrying the sister of an initiation mate. Marriage between cousins of any kind is prohibited.

The lives of young boys are largely devoted to herding goats. A boy is sent out in charge of a goat camp for several weeks at a time. He stays there day and night and is brought food once a day by an older member of the family. Then he is relieved by another boy--a brother or nephew--and is brought back to the village where he takes charge of the home flock for a while. When there is a lack of boys in a family girls are required to do the herding and may even be sent to the goat camps. The normal work of girls, though, is to help their mothers and married sisters with the field work. They are given miniature digging-sticks almost as soon as they can walk, and soon learn the rhythm of using it. The basic costume for girls is a short leather skirt which is slit vertically into narrow strips. It is worn tightly around the hips and can best be described as a Bikini-style hula skirt. This garment is worn by all women until they have given birth to children. An outer wrap of goat skin is usually worn while walking to and from work. Mothers wear a tight leather skirt which is equally scanty, but which is not slit. The costume for boys is a loose goat skin which is fastened at the right shoulder. This usually flies in the wind behind them leaving their bodies stark naked.

After his initiation into the warrior class, a boy is no longer required to herd goats. His traditional duties then were to defend his village against Masai raids and the goat camps against the attacks of wild animals. The young warriors of a village organize dance festivals several times a year. During these periods the days are spent at a camp in the forest eating goat meat and drinking infusions made from the barks of various trees and shrubs, some of which induce a state of narcosis. Then in the evening they return well fed and stimulated, to dance in the village plaza. The custom of feasting on meat and drinking infusions of bark is similar to the manyatta of Masai warriors, and was no doubt borrowed from the Masai. During the dancing several of the warriors may go into a state of frenzy as a result of the drug which they have taken. When this happens they are seized and held down by their comrades in case they should run amok and injure themselves or others. The young warriors are also taught about water matters by the elders and learn to irrigate fields. The hazardous work of gathering wild honey from the hives is largely done by warriors. Junior warriors are supposed to lead celibate lives. Certain barks are believed to have the action of cooling sexual passions, and infusions of these barks are drunk for this purpose as needed.

The military duties of the warriors, in the days of Masai raids, were mainly defensive. Each Sonjo village was surrounded by an impenetrable thicket pierced by one or two fortified gates which were closed at night.

The warrior classes were organised into patrols which took turns in guarding the gates at all times. The whole class was expected to turn out instantly on hearing the alarm signal. These young men lived together in communal houses of their own. Occasionally the Sonjo took offensive action against the Masai. Several times the Masai tried to starve a Sonjo village into submission by burning the fields, which were outside of the fortifications and could not be effectively defended. The answer to this was a night raid on Masai cattle camps. Showers of poisoned arrows caused havoc among the cattle. Due to this threat of retaliation, the Masai tacitly agreed to spare the Sonjo crops. Now that amicable relations with the Masai are established on a firm foundation, the only duties of the warriors as an armed group are in hunting down leopards which have attacked goat camps.

By the time that a young man is permitted to marry, he may desire a different girl from the one to whom he was betrothed as a child. Or the young couple may have developed mutual antipathy towards one another. In this case it is possible to arrange an exchange of brides with another dissatisfied fiancée. If the two bride-prices were the same, the exchange is even up. If they were unequal the difference must be made good by the man with the cheaper bride. This practice gives some answer to the criticism that marriages are arranged by elders without regard for the preferences of the young people. But it is only one aspect of a wider principle which entails other undesirable features. For it is possible to exchange wives as well as fiancées so long as any differences in bride-prices are adjusted. The matter is first arranged between the two husbands. Then the wives are given a grace period for finding alternative suitors who are willing to make an exchange of wives. Sometimes an exchange is three-sided: A takes B's wife, B takes C's wife, and C takes A's wife. If a man wants to get rid of his wife and can find no one to exchange with, or if he is badly in need of livestock, he may sell her outright to another man usually from a different village. The wife is again given the chance of finding an alternative buyer. A wife herself can request a divorce, provided she can find a suitor who will pay her husband the bride-price, but the husband has the option of granting or refusing the divorce.

The exchange and sale of wives are considered to be personal affairs in which the village water board interferes only to the extent of collecting a remarriage fee of seven goats. In the case of an exchange of wives, both of the husbands pay the fee. When a wife is sold outright only the buyer is taxed by the board. If a wife has young children they go with her when she is exchanged or sold. The buyer pays an additional four goats for each child. In these cases the second husband has full legal rights over his stepchildren, receives the bride-price for a girl, and is responsible for providing a boy with a wife. Such children become members of the clan of their stepfather. Thus in Sonjo law biological paternity is given little recognition; rights over children are invested in their legal father rather than their genitor.

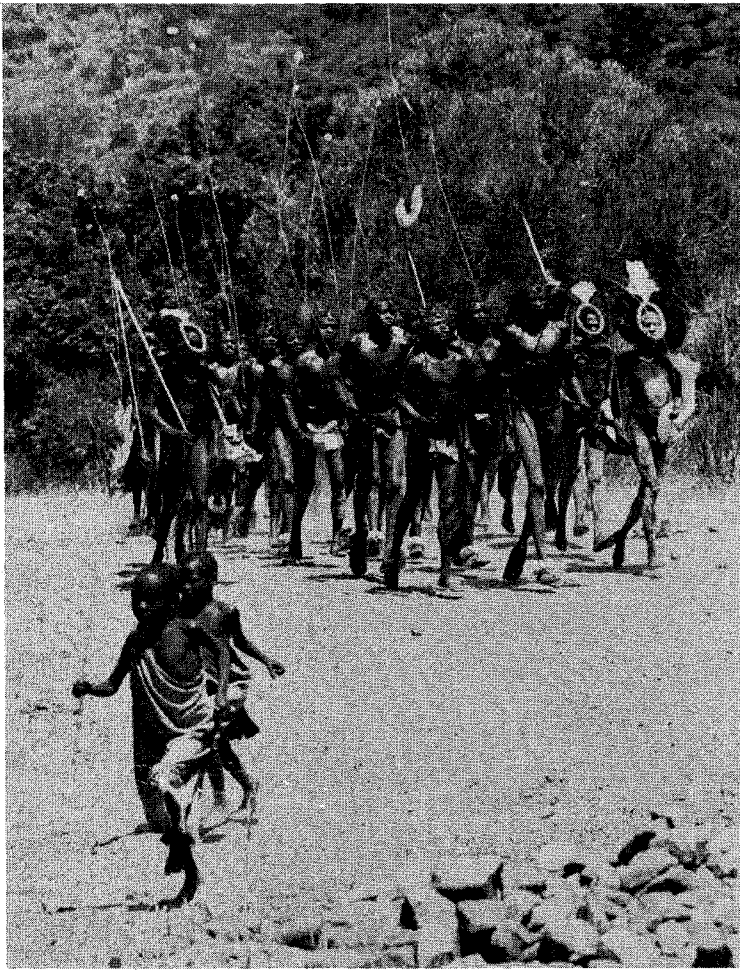
The principle of father-right is strongly established among the Sonjo, in personal relations as well as in economic matters. Respect and absolute obedience is demanded of sons even when they have grown up and become the fathers of families. All livestock and other forms of wealth possessed by sons, even that which they have earned themselves, legally belongs to their father and may be called in by him if he so desires. Normally such property is kept and used by the sons with the assurance that they will acquire legal title

to it through inheritance on the father's death. Every man desires as many beehives as possible and starts carving them and placing them in trees early in life. These hives belong to the father, and the honey that is collected must be turned over to him. Through this means the elders are supplied with the mead which they require for hospitality and religious rites. It is natural that children should be ardently desired by the Sonjo. Daughters bring in wealth to the lineage in the form of goats paid as bride-price, while sons provide security and prestige for an ageing father. The desire for children is an important motive for the polygamy which is practiced on a modest scale.

Each of the Sonjo villages is a self-contained unit economically. Bonds of family relationship and marriages between villages are not numerous, and social intercourse between villages is mostly informal. The one factor above all others that unites the villages into a single tribe is the system of religious beliefs. Sonjo society is theocentric to an extent that is rare among tribes of East and Central Africa. Almost all of the important features of their culture are sanctioned by divine command. God ordered that goats and sheep be raised and prohibited cattle. It is also true that cattle would have been plundered by the powerful Masai, but the Sonjo prefer supernatural explanations of their customs. The use of digging-sticks, the system of irrigation, the wearing of skin garments, the brewing of honey mead, marriage and family customs--these and other traits are sanctified in myths which trace their origins to divine commandments.

The god of the Sonjo is called Xambageu. A cycle of myths traces his development from a culture hero who was capable of performing miracles to a diety on whom the welfare of the tribe depended. It is believed that he appeared in the world without father or mother, that his lifetime represented a golden age in Sonjo history during which there was neither sickness nor famine, that he died and was resurrected from the grave, that he was taken to heaven on a cloud and that he will appear at the end of the world to save all faithful Sonjo. It is possible, though I think unlikely, that the ideas of supernatural birth, bodily resurrection, and salvation were borrowed from Christian teachings, but the whole cult and the ritual that goes with it is so elaborate that it must have been in existence long before any possible Christian contact. Xambageu is believed to reside permanently on Ol Donyo Lengai, a volcano which has been active in recent years and which still emits smoke from time to time. This mountain sixty miles to the south is visible from all the villages on clear days. It is called "Mountain of Gods" (Mogongo jo Bagwe) by the Sonjo which implies recognition of the Masai god who inhabits it as well. This is also the meaning of its Masai name, Ol Donyo Lengai.

The village of Kisangiro acquired its religious significance from the belief that Xambageu died there. In a sense it is his Sonjo residence. He may be approached there by delegations from other villages, who bring tribute to the priests in charge of the Kisangiro temple. Each village has several temples of its own, located just inside the village gates, where sacrifices are made on certain feast days. One or two priests in each village accept offerings on behalf of Xambageu and are in charge of special religious rites. The springs which supply irrigation water, so important in Sonjo economy, are regarded as sacred, and each one has a myth telling of its miraculous creation by Xambageu. The close vicinity of a spring is taboo and can not be entered



Warriors Dancing at Harvest Festival

skins in bright colours. They reach a state of excitement through eating meat and drinking infusions of stimulating bark and perform warlike dances through the village and in the plaza. Although regular sacrifices and prayers are made to Xambageu, the harvest festival is primarily secular in nature. We witnessed the last of this years cycle of harvest festivals at Samunge shortly after our arrival in Sonjo.

The other festival is called "the Visitation of God," and is strictly religious in character. This cycle is in progress at the present time. I have already observed proceedings at three of the villages, and the Samunge festival will probably start in a few days. During this period Xambageu leaves his home on Ol Donyo Lengai and is fully present in Sonjo. According to popular belief, the exact date for a Visitation festival cannot be set in advance. Xambageu himself announces in a loud voice, which sounds like a trumpet that the festival will start the following day. During the course of the festival the people of the village wear nothing but skin garments, except for some of the small boys who have acquired cloths and are not in possession of skins.

by anyone except young children and old people. Because of the clearness of its water, I developed some films at a sacred spring. In order not to transgress the taboo, I was obliged to work at the very end of the stream where it joins the main furrow. Ritual matters which involve the elders of the water board are conducted in special clearings near the springs. A number of trees are sacred to Xambageu, some of them being associated with events in the mythical past. The oldest of the sacred trees have their boughs propped up with crutches. The fate of a very sacred tree at Samunge which blew down and obstructed the motor road was recounted in RFG - 15.

In addition to numerous special sacrifices, dances, and public prayers, the Sonjo observe two cycles of festivals each year. The first is a thanksgiving festival which is held for four days at each village in rotation. This is a happy occasion for feasting, drinking, and dancing. The warriors wear their finest decorations and paint their

Everyone who desires a special blessing from Xambageu gives an offering of grain, livestock, or money to the priest and explains his special request.

The ritual starts each morning of the festival while it is still dark with sacrifices by the priests at the temples and by the elders at the springs. At dawn the whole village joins in a hymn to the rising sun. The first three days are occupied with an interminable series of slow dances accompanied by hymns. Between dances the priest chants prayers for each person who has made an offering. The chanter is answered by blasts of a horn which come from a hidden altar at the edge of the dancing plaza. This is firmly believed to be the voice of Xambageu giving assent to the prayer. At my first acquaintance with this ritual I outraged my hosts by inquiring who was blowing the horn. The climax of the festival comes on the afternoon of the last day when the presence of Xambageu is celebrated in a solemn ritual which has resemblance to a High Mass. The elders of the village, who have gathered at the spring, dance in slow procession to the village plaza. As they approach, the trumpet voice sounds from their midst. Tension mounts among the onlookers and the warriors who are waiting in the plaza. After their arrival the elders chant a liturgy with responses by the warriors. The voice of Xambageu sounds more and more urgently. Finally the warriors break into a leaping dance round the plaza. The ritual ends with an exultant hymn by the assembly.

I do not yet pretend to understand Sonjo theology. Like many other primitive and ancient religions, it is the result of a process of syncretism. There is a word for God--Mugwe--which in some ways is the same as Xambageu and yet distinct. Xambageu is identified with the sun under the name Riob, but the mythology explaining this identification is extremely involved. Having had a Lutheran mission in their country for seven years, the Sonjo are generally familiar with Christian theology and also with Masai beliefs about God. They do not seem to look on these as false gods or heresies, but as truths which can be assimilated to their theology. They are the chosen people of Xambageu, but outsiders are welcome to share to some extent in his blessings. The neighboring Masai seems to be impressed by Sonjo religion and often come to the festivals bringing offerings of goats. Having a low birth rate, probably as a result of the high incidence of venereal disease, their prayers are mainly for the birth of children.

Viewed in broad perspective, the Sonjo appear to have externalized in explicit beliefs and practices certain ideas and feelings about the supernatural which are present in latent form in other East African tribes. This religious development has undoubtedly vitalized their culture. It has also reduced to minor importance the more usual African beliefs in witchcraft, ancestral spirits, and nature spirits. Following Toynbee's categories of historical explanation, Sonjo religion can be regarded as the response of a society to a special challenge. I believe that a thorough and detailed investigation of the subject would be well repaid. Granting that their religion has been an important factor in their survival as a distinct tribe, it remains to be seen whether it will stand by them in the vicissitudes of the future.

Sincerely,

Robert F. Gray
Robert F. Gray.