

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RFG - 18
Sonjo Tribe
II - Present Situation

c/o Barclays Bank
Arusha, Tanganyika
December 22, 1955

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

In considering recent changes in Sonjo culture, it is convenient to distinguish between the gradual changes which are the result of impersonal economic and social forces or of casual contact with outside cultures, and changes which have been deliberately planned by government and missionary agents. An inducement for change, which may become important in the future, is the example set by the more advanced elite of the tribe. This small group of natives having modest educational achievements includes the court clerk (the only English-speaking Sonjo), the medical dresser, two or three members of the Lutheran Mission, and a catechist of the Catholic Church. Although these people have only a superficial acquaintance with Western knowledge and ideals, it is sufficient to separate them from the tribe, and their personal influence is small. Two or three more educated Sonjo hold government jobs in other parts of Masai District.

The warrior classes constitute the main contact point with the outside world through which gradual changes are introduced into the tribe. With the



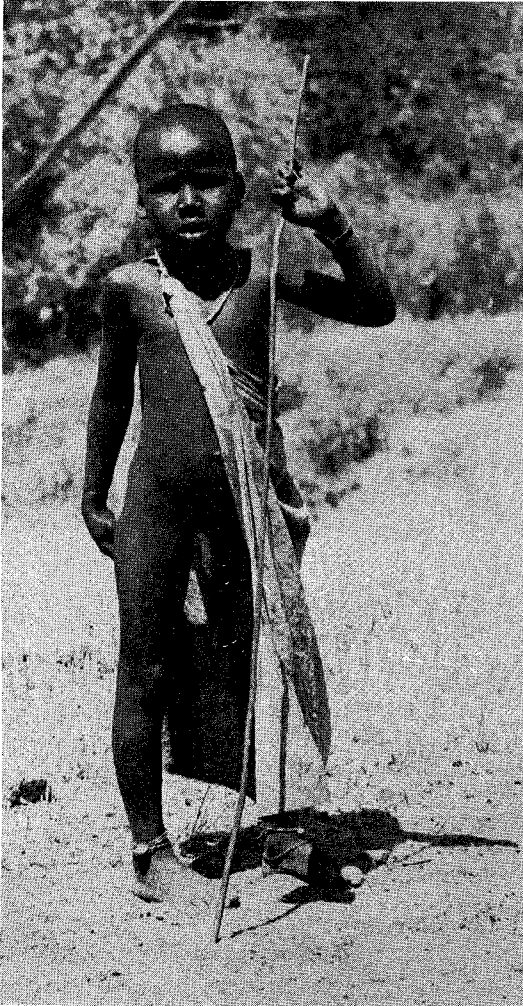
Sonjo Girls

cessation of hostilities with the Masai the Sonjo warriors were no longer required in the villages for their vital function of military defense. At the same time a minimum need for money appeared in the tribe. The warriors, freed from their traditional duties at home, started going out into the world to work for cash wages. Most of the young men now go away for a period of one or two years to earn money. There are said to be small colonies of Sonjo workers at Arusha and Musoma in Tanganyika and Narok in Kenya. They seem to live abstemiously, do not mix socially with strangers, and save most of their pay which they bring home with them. The returning warrior buys a few needs for himself and presents for the family and turns the rest of the money over to his father. Thereafter he expects to live the traditional life at home. In addition to this wage work, the young men are required to do a few months communal work for the government, being paid a shilling a day plus food rations.

This outside work provides almost the only source of money entering the tribe. No cash crops are grown and the sale of livestock out of the country is negligible. Out of this income pole tax for all adult males of the tribe must be paid and trade goods purchased. Although the earnings of one or two sons may have to last a family for a whole generation, the money itself is not hoarded. After the immediate cash needs have been satisfied the rest of the money is used for buying goats from other Sonjo who are in need of cash. Grain and honey is also exchanged for money to some extent. Through internal trade the money entering the tribe any one year is widely distributed. But the taxes which are paid and the amount of imported goods which are purchased can only balance the cash wages brought in that year--a very small sum when distributed over the whole tribe.

A small shop or "duka" which supplies some of the needs of the tribe for merchandise stocks beads, wire for ornaments, cloths of "merikani" which are worn as garments by young boys, and maize meal. Small amounts of tea, cigarettes, soap, kerosene, and wheat flour are also kept for sale to the teachers and other government employees. Other goods are purchased from the two dukas at Loliondo, which is only 14 miles away by foot path, though it is 50 miles by car road. Most of the prominent elders--for instance members of the village water board--wear blankets in place of the traditional skin garments, but at Kisangiro the wearing of blankets still meets with disapproval. A warrior, after he has earned some money, buys a large cloth which he commonly wears as his only garment. Some of the senior warriors also have blankets. Axes, pangas, and simes (short swords carried by warriors) are now mostly purchased at dukas, but until recently all iron tools and weapons were manufactured by local blacksmiths. Knives, razors, skin scrapers, and adzes for making beehives are still supplied by Sonjo smiths, who constitute a special caste which does not intermarry with the rest of the population.

The government of Tanganyika has appointed a hierarchy of native officials for the purpose of bringing the tribe in line with modern administrative methods. A headman or mangi is appointed for each village, together with two or three advising elders. A tribal court or baraza is constituted of any one mangi and three elders. The administrative work of the baraza is done by a court clerk aided by six messengers--one from each village. The resulting organization is unwieldy and inefficient. No account is taken of the indigenous political structure. Most court cases



Young Shepherd

involving native law, both in the civil and criminal categories, are still settled before the village water boards, which are not officially recognized by the government. The power of these boards, ultimately derived from their control of irrigation water, is being undermined by a recent government decree stating that irrigation water is the common property of the whole tribe, that it must be fairly divided, and that it must not be withheld from anyone who needs it. The villages are still attached to their autonomy and independence, but there is a growing realization of the need for an efficient central government that will permit the tribe to function as a unified group. The answer to this problem seems to be a paramount chief, and all that is lacking is a man with the necessary qualifications and education who would be accepted by all the villages.

With one exception, the social organization of the people has not been materially altered by government action. This concerns the selling of children with wives, a custom which has been declared repugnant to civilized ideals and prohibited. Although the custom is still carried on sub rosa, most people fear the penalty. This order has resulted in some fundamental changes in family organization. According to the old traditional principle, a woman's legal husband had full rights of paternity over her children regardless of who their genitor was. Under the new law, children remain permanently with the

father who begot them. If there is divorce, a wife may be separated from her children, and a new wife may assume the role of stepmother to the children.

Agriculture officers visit Sonjo from time to time, diagnose troubles, and make recommendations, but almost nothing has yet been done to change the traditional methods of cultivation. There is a standing order that every man must plant a small plot of cassava as famine insurance in years of low rainfall, but I think that less than one per cent of the people comply with the order. Some years ago an enterprising agriculture officer distributed 200 iron hoes in Sonjo to replace digging-sticks, which he felt were outmoded implements retarding progress. The natives would not use them for cultivation, but it was found that they gave out a pleasing sound when struck with a baton. They have now replaced wooden clappers as musical instruments at village dances. It happened that digging-sticks were sanctioned by a myth of divine origin, while the clappers were regarded as merely secular instruments. A project under way

at present is to teach the Sonjo to use oxen for plowing and for hauling manure to the fields. With one or two exceptions, the people show no interest whatever in these ideas, and until a much larger staff of officials is present to enforce the rules the oxen program will probably make little progress.

The veterinary department has tried to bring about improvements in animal husbandry. A monthly auction was established for goats and sheep, but as only a handful of animals were brought for sale it was abandoned. Cattle were introduced into Sonjo about ten years ago, at first in the face of strong disapproval because of a myth that Xambageu had forbidden the people to keep cattle. Cattle are now raised in three of the villages, the numbers being roughly proportionate to the degree of tsetse infestation in the village grazing grounds. Samunge owners now have over 1,000 head of cattle; the other two villages have about 300 between them. If tsetse-free pasture land can be expanded the future prosperity of the tribe may lie in cattle raising. The goat population of a village is about 8,000, which averages out at 40 or 50 animals per house. This number has probably remained constant for a long time. It is sufficient for the economic and ritual needs of the tribe.

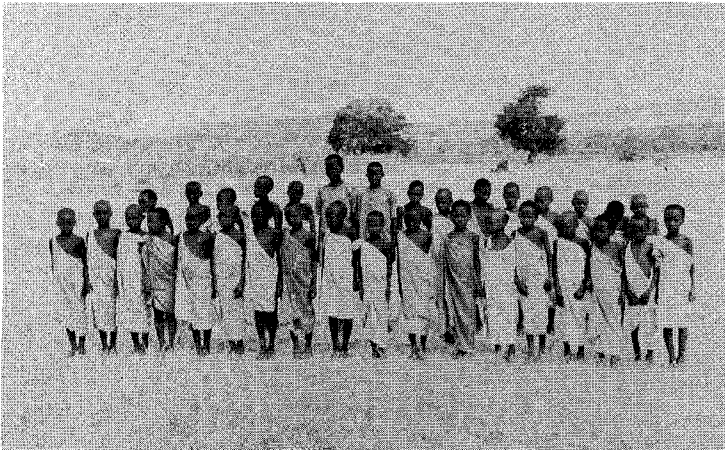
A medical dispensary is located near two adjacent villages. Little use is made of it by the more distant villages. The dispensary can have had little effect on the health or death rate of the people as yet. It does not inspire much confidence even in the nearby villages, whose inhabitants seem to come to our camp for medical treatment in preference to the dispensary. Lack of competent supervision is the greatest drawback. Dressers

at remote dispensaries like Sonjo, who have received only a very elementary training, are irresistably tempted to accept fees for treatments and to sell their small supply of medicines for cash rather than use them on patients where they are most needed. A former medical officer ordered that pit latrines be dug and used in the villages. The order was complied with and the latrines dug, but as soon as the officer left the District the order lapsed. The latrines were filled in as a menace to public safety and the people went back to their old habits of relieving themselves in the bush. This seems to have been the only effort to date at sanitary education and engineering.



Scraping Hair from a Goat Skin

The government school at Sonjo was started rather inauspiciously in 1948. As a result of poor attendance by the pupils and the deteriorating health of the teacher, the first year was a failure. To this day there is little enthusiasm for education among the Sonjo. It was soon found necessary to impose a stiff fine on the fathers of truant children; the present penalty is ten shillings for every day of unexcused absence. Judging from the remarks in the school log-book the teachers were not welcomed by the natives and they found their situation uniformly unpleasant. The education department, realizing this, seldom kept teachers at Sonjo school for more than a year at a time. The head teacher at the time of our arrival, a Chaga with twenty years of teaching experience, applied for transfer after two terms. He told me that if the transfer were refused he would resign from government service. Fortunately his transfer came through, but he was required to stay on for five weeks after the end of term in order to turn over the school to his successor. Rather than stay at Sonjo for this period he made the three-day trip to his home in Moshi at his own expense, and will return the same way in time to turn over. This journey will cost him over a month's pay.



First Grade of Sonjo School

Some of the early teachers were ardent Catholics and started giving religious instruction in the government school. One of the missionaries in charge of Masai District--Father Hillman, an American priest--followed up this start and made several visits to the school. The Lutherans and some of the pagans objected and the situation led up to a riot in which the teacher's house was stoned. The D.O. and the school inspection then made a ruling that no religious instruction could be given in school. In the interest of public order Father Hillman

was requested by the government not to return to Sonjo without permission. However, the ground work was done, and there is now a cadre of students who are pro-Catholic and anti-Lutheran. The Catholic missionaries are watching Sonjo carefully, and if their sympathizers are persistent in their demands they will undoubtedly win permission to build a Catholic Mission in time.

The most controvertial school issue concerns the educating of Sonjo girls. This subject was brought up at several meetings, but the Sonjo were so vehement in their rejection of the idea that the matter was dropped. The government intends eventually to compel the Sonjo to send girls to school. The Sonjo rightly realize that this would have far-reaching consequences for their social structure. Many girls, for example, are betrothed in childhood and from then until marriage they must avoid close contact with their prospective husbands. It would be regarded as highly immoral for a young betrothed couple to attend the same school together. A schoolgirl for whom bride-price had already been paid might well be chosen at the end of her fourth grade to go on to a middle school somewhere else. In that case the tribe



Dancing Warriors Excited by Stimulating Drugs

would have little control over her and her fiance might lose his bride-price. It is also realized that an educated girl might be reluctant to break her back with long hours of cultivating with a digging-stick, and that it might be difficult to sell such a wife to another man--a right that is cherished by Sonjo men.

The school, for all its defects, undoubtedly holds the greatest promise for fundamental changes in the future. The teachers seem to acquire great prestige in the eyes of their pupils, and partly for that reason they are feared and disliked by adults. Sonjo culture is so tightly knit that when one aspect of it is questioned, as it inevitably must be with the spread of education, the whole structure will loosen. Up to now, though the impact of education on the tribe has been slight.

A Lutheran mission was established in Sonjo at about the same time as the school. The Lutherans, who had been operating missions for the

Masai since 1927, decided on the village of Samunge for their station because the government school was to be built at Digodigo and Kisangiro would not allow any foreigners in their village. The Lutheran delegation arrived inopportunately at Samunge during the annual religious festival and were not permitted to enter the village. However, the elders took time off for a meeting and granted them a mission site just outside the village. The first African pastors and teachers were volunteers, but later these positions became less popular and people had to be assigned to them. In 1950 the first baptism of thirteen Sonjo was done. At present some 25 or 30 Sonjo profess to be Lutherans, but the rate of apostasy seems to be high. The difficulties of the mission have paralleled those of the school. A bush school was opened at Samunge which taught children for the first two grades. After the novelty wore off the boys were taken out of school by their fathers and sent back to herding goats. They returned only when the government agreed to apply the compulsory attendance rules to the mission school. Later the Lutherans opened bush schools at the villages of Sale and Oldonyo Sambu. The teachers at these schools are looked on with awe by their friends as true pioneers in the wilderness.

I hesitate to say how well the native Lutherans understand the doctrines of Christianity. They have certainly not completely abandoned their old pagan beliefs. I questioned a number of Christians during the recent pagan religious festival. None of them would go so far as to say that the sound of the horn was not the voice of Xambageu. At most they equate Xambageu with the Devil--a powerful and dangerous being--but do not deny his existence. Some of the elders of Samunge seem to regret having allowed the Lutherans in, and now they want a Catholic mission, apparently in the hope that the two missions would cancel each other out. The mission schools have much less prestige with children than the government school, and the Catholics have astutely attempted to identify themselves with the government school.

The population of Sonjo was listed as 3,500 in the 1948 census. I estimate the population to be larger than this now, but these figures are not very reliable. Judging from individual family histories and from their general reputation with the Masai, the Sonjo have a high birth rate. The available irrigation water is now used to the limit and there is little hope of expanding agriculture short of some revolutionary change in methods of cultivation. The excess population is being continually drained off, the young men settling down in towns or joining the Masai, who are chronically short of man-power, while the extra women are sold to the Masai as wives. These people are permanently lost to the tribe. About 20% of the village house sites are now vacant, indicating that food production is less abundant than formerly probably as a result of progressive desiccation in climate.

The Sonjo have no tradition of hospitality to strangers. During the annual religious festival, Masai (and presumably other tribes) are welcomed provided they bring offerings of goats to the Sonjo God, but there are no foreigners permanently settled in the country. One such foreigner, Saidi Omari, who was mentioned in RFG - 15, was living here when we first arrived but left soon thereafter. After seven years he decided that life in Sonjo was socially unbearable. His buildings and well-developed fields, which were sold for a song, are crumbling away and reverting to the condition of ordinary Sonjo shambas.

The name "Sonjo" and the names of the six villages are not native names. They were applied to the Sonjo by the Masai who guided the first

Europeans. With their appearance on early maps of the region they became official designations. Now, as a minor manifestation of nativism, there is a movement for replacing these names officially with the traditional native ones. I have only heard the young men of Samunge express this desire.

I do not want to give the impression that the Sonjo are surly. They are lively people who laugh and sing a great deal. Left to themselves their lives seem to be happy and full, troubled only by the hunger periods which occur in the frequent years of low rainfall. Superficially they are polite and friendly with strangers. At a deeper level they are uncommunicative realizing that their highly integrated culture is threatened by the outside world. They are not yet ready to meet this challenge openly. Instead they have tried to avoid it by turning their faces to the past, intensifying their archaic ritual activity, becoming morbidly conservative.

Sincerely,

Robert F. Gray
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Received New York 1/9/56.