NANDI:  
FROM CATTLE-KEEPERS  
TO CASH-CROP FARMERS  

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As one travels northwest from Nairobi, Kenya, through lush farmland dotted with herds of dairy cattle, the terrain slopes gradually upward to the edge of the Great Rift Valley. Here the view stretches off seemingly to the ends of the earth. Winding down to the valley floor, the road continues across arid plains and finally descends toward Lake Nakuru—pink around the edge with thousands of flamingoes—and Nakuru town. Climbing the other side of the Rift Valley, the road levels off slightly but keeps ascending through the Tinderet Forest, crossing the equator near Timboroa Summit at an altitude of over 10,000 feet. Here begins a gradual descent across the Uasin Gishu Plateau—bleak, windy, chilly, and often overcast—to the town of Eldoret, and the home territory of the Nandi. The road into Nandi District descends gently from an altitude of over seven thousand feet through rolling grasslands, crossing marshes filled with crested cranes before reaching Kapsabet, the District Center.

It is lush and green here, unlike the arid plains of the Rift Valley. It rains every month. During the main dry season in January and February it doesn’t rain daily; as much as two weeks can pass with no rain. During the height of the rainy season in July, it can stay overcast and drizzly for days at a time. During most of the year, the day dawns bright and sunny, but rain clouds roll in predictably during the mid-afternoon. After a downpour, it clears again for the last few hours of daylight.

South and west of Kapsabet, the countryside becomes broken into more distinct and frequent hills and valleys with rocky outcroppings, until one reaches the Mau Escarpment in the west and the Southern Nandi Escarpment in the south. The edge of the Southern Escarpment, between 5,500 and 6,000 feet in altitude, overlooks another part of the Great Rift Valley. One can stand on the edge and look out at a part of Lake Victoria and sugar plantations on the surrounding plains more than a thousand feet below.

It’s hard not to be affected by the grandeur of the physical environment, and to expect that the inhabitants will match it. And the Nandi are impressive: physically tall and fit, dignified in demeanor, though friendly, exuding self-confidence and fierce pride in their warrior heritage. The international track and field community knows these people very well, since they produce a disproportionate number of world-class distance runners, the best known of whom is Kipchoge (“Kip”) Keino.

East Africa is known for aggressive cattle raiding. A popular myth among the Nandi is also found among the Maasai and other traditional pastoralist warrior peoples: “At the beginning of the
world, God created cattle and gave them to our people. However, as time went on, many cattle wandered into the wrong hands. Though it is a serious crime to steal a cow from one of our own people, raiding others for cattle is simply restoring them to the ownership that God intended.” Modern East African countries no longer permit cattle raids, but as a symbol this ethos is still alive. A young man, leaving home in 1976 on a track scholarship to an American university, was presented a spear and shield by his father’s older brother and told: “In the past our young men raided with spears and shields; today you raid with pens and papers, but with the same goal—to bring wealth to our people.”

The Nandi were among the most feared warriors of East Africa during the nineteenth century. “Nandi” is said to be a name of recent origin derived from the Swahili word for “cormorant,” mnandi. This fish-eating, diving bird was a metaphor for Nandi warriors to the Swahili inland traders (East African coastal people of mixed African and Arab ancestry): like the cormorant, Nandi swept down from the heights to strike suddenly at their prey, the peoples of the plains. The Nandi came forcefully to British attention in the late 1800s as the bane of attempts to lay rail and telegraph lines; warriors repeatedly swooped down the Escarpment to steal iron and wires. The Nandi became famous among African peoples for the tenacity of their resistance to British rule; they were finally subdued only after a massive “punitive expedition” against them in 1905.

**ECONOMY**

Cattle have been central to Nandi life and economy for as long as anyone remembers. Fresh and preserved milk (*mursik*) were dietary staples. Nandi slaughtered sheep and goats, particularly on special occasions, but like other African pastoralists, they rarely slaughtered cattle. They added animal protein to their diet by bleeding cattle and mixing the blood with milk. This was done by tying a strap around the animal’s neck so a large vein stood out, shooting an arrow into it so that it didn’t go all the way through, then withdrawing the arrow and allowing the blood to flow into a container. The animal was damaged little, and could “give blood” again in a month to six weeks. This practice has now been all but abandoned. With limited pasture, people keep only
plow oxen and dairy cattle, and cannot afford to weaken animals whose productivity has clear economic value.

However, the traditional economy did not depend only on cattle. Because of rich topsoil and plentiful rainfall, Nandi District is excellent farmland and the Nandi have always been farmers. Before the colonial period, the staple crop was eleusine, or finger millet, cooked into a hard porridge and eaten with a variety of green leafy vegetables. Crops were cultivated near homesteads, and most cattle were taken to graze in distant pastures by the neighborhood young men. It is said that during grain shortfalls women took sheep and goats to the lowland villages of neighboring ethnic groups to trade for grain. To what extent the Nandi consciously chose to concentrate on herding instead of producing grain is debatable.

During the colonial era, hybrid maize, which produces well at high altitudes and with heavy rainfall, replaced eleusine as the staple. Eleusine is still grown for dietary variety and as a component of local beer. Because the colonial government believed privatization of resources was the best route to economic development, land was divided into individual holdings with private titles beginning in 1954. Today Nandi live on small individual farms (averaging about twenty acres in the northern part of the district). Each family grows crops and grazes cattle on its own land. Most families produce a surplus of maize for the market, and tea is also a common cash crop.

Cattle continue to be important in the modern economy. The Nandi have an incredibly rich vocabulary describing cattle—anatomy, physical features, variations in color, and so on. Much conversation time was devoted to cows and their merits. This is still a popular topic, but the emphasis now is different. People no longer try to maximize the size of their herds; instead, they try to maximize milk production. Kenya Cooperative Creameries, the government sponsored dairy, buys milk daily and processes it into a wide variety of products including ultra-pasteurized “shelf-milk” and tinned butter and cheese. These products are exported to other African countries. Most Nandi families’ major source of income is production and sale of maize, milk, and tea in varying combinations. Few traditional zebu cattle remain in Nandi; they have been replaced by “upgraded” cattle, a mix of traditional and European strains valued for resistance to disease, or Holstein-Freisian dairy cattle, valued for high milk production. Bulls have largely been replaced by artificial insemination. In
1976–1977 the government Veterinary Service agent who drove around the countryside in a yellow VW Beetle offering insemination from an array of purebred varieties was known as the “bull-man.”

FIELD SITUATION

I first arrived in Nandi in 1976 as a young doctoral candidate in anthropology, armed with research fellowships from the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. My husband Leon, then a graduate student in film and photography, accompanied me. Our goal was to study social change and gender roles. As a student I had spent years preparing to do research. On one level, I was elated that the time had finally come, that I had passed my doctoral exams, that I had succeeded in snatching several sources of research funding, that after a long struggle with Kenyan government bureaucracies over research clearance, I had finally received it. On another level, I was terrified. That there were no longer any ordinary obstacles meant that there were no longer any excuses. What was left to do was to get in there, find a place to live, adjust to lack of heat and running water and the presence of daily rain, learn to communicate with these people in their own language, make friends, and learn everything it was possible to learn about their lives and their culture—all in eighteen months or so. How could anyone possibly do it? Yet I knew that my professors had all managed somehow. My major professor had been younger than I, and a single woman among a “stone age” people in Highland New Guinea who had barely been contacted by outsiders. I would be in a setting where almost every community contained a handful of English-speakers (English was the language of high school education), where there were stores with batteries for my tape recorder and radio, where not far from whatever area I ended up in there was a district center with electricity and running water—and I had Leon for company and moral support. With such luxurious fieldwork conditions, only a real wimp would complain!

We chose as our research site a sublocation north and slightly west of Kapsabet, on the edge of a forest. This was a recently set-
tled area, typical of other Nandi communities in many ways, slightly different in some. Household heads were younger on average than elsewhere, and as a group they had a notably forward-looking attitude. Several men worked hard to get us to settle in their community. Why? I’m not sure I ever totally understood. Pride in community and the wish to publicize it played a part, as did curiosity about the new and exotic (us). They also asked us to teach in their self-help secondary school, since the students’ English would profit by having native speakers as teachers. For us, it was a perfect way to pay back the community for its help.

One day in June of 1976 we moved into a round, mud-walled, thatched house in a family compound near the sublocation “center” (a group of shops and a tree where old men heard legal cases). It was a very small house—we later built a bigger one—and half the neighborhood turned out to watch us move in. They marveled at the incredible collection of stuff “Chumbek” (Europeans) always bring with them. We thought we were traveling light, but between trunks full of clothes and office supplies, tables, typewriter, books, paper, stove, lanterns, and more, it was a squeeze. Fortunately, a traditional Nandi house has a storage loft, or “tabut” (for drying firewood), just under the thatched roof, above head level. We planned to buy a four-foot wide mattress in Nairobi and have a bed built to fit it. However, a Nandi friend convinced us that this extravagance would be seen as another bit of white people’s insanity, and take up too much floor space. So the two of us ended up sleeping for eighteen months in a three-foot wide bed—a real hardship only at the end of our stay, when I was seven months pregnant.

Our host family was headed by Jacob (a pseudonym, as are all names used here for Africans), an enterprising young man about six years older than my husband. Jacob seemed never to sit still. He was famous in the community for his boundless energy—always dashing from place to place, involved in dozens of schemes and projects. One of his money-making projects was buying surplus cattle and driving them through the forest to sell to butchers in neighboring Trans-Nzoia District. Through enterprise and thrift, Jacob had saved money and acquired any land that became available for sale near his original small holding, so that when we arrived he was one of the larger land-holders in the area. We interacted with the family and the community as if Leon were Jacob’s younger brother, though we weren’t formally adopt-
ed. That first day, after we unloaded the furniture, Jacob took
Leon off to get acquainted, while Rael (Rachel), his wife, helped
me organize our domestic life. She was younger than Jacob, about
my age, a large, pleasant, extroverted woman with a ready smile
and a directive, no-nonsense, take-charge manner. In another cul-
tural setting, Rael might have been a politician—but among the
Nandi this is an almost exclusively male role. The public
demeanor of many Nandi women is subdued and submissive,
but while Rael chatted easily and got along with everybody, I
hardly ever saw her behave submissively except to Jacob, her
father, and some of the older men. Though Rael spoke Swahili,
she insisted from the first that I speak Nandi as much as possible.
Much of my knowledge of the subtleties of Nandi culture came
from the hours I spent in her smoky kitchen shed gossiping with
local women.

A Nandi compound is a collection of houses, some close
together, some further apart, that face each other across an open
space and are connected by a network of pathways. The house
belonging to Jacob, Rael, and their children, with their kitchen
shed and granary, was the center of our compound. About
twenty to thirty yards to one side of their house stood the house
of Jacob’s widowed mother. Our house faced “Kogo’s” (grand-
ma’s) house across a wide pasture. Ultimately we had two hous-
es, one split in half to accommodate our two field assistants,
recent school-leavers from other communities. Behind Jacob’s
house was a maize field; at the far end of that was the house of
Jacob’s sister Marta, who was permanently separated from her
husband. From Marta’s, a path led to the home of one of the
men who convinced us to settle in the community. The nearest
neighbor on the other side was about thirty yards from our
house, across a fence. The main road formed the third bound-
ary; the nearest neighbors on the fourth side were on the next
ridge, a fifteen-minute walk down a hill, across the river, and up
the other side.

**GENDER: EARLY LEARNING EXPERIENCES**
The group of men who first recruited us to the community became Leon’s “age-mates” and close associates. The first day we settled in, they came in the late afternoon to invite him to go to the river to bathe. A huge group of neighborhood boys trooped along after them (I assumed just for the novelty of seeing what a chumbindet, or white man, looked like naked). The next day I heard from Rael that Leon had neighborhood approval on two important counts: that he was circumcised (the mark of male adulthood among the Nandi, who practice adolescent circumcision); and that he didn’t shiver in the cold water. Throughout the day, other women congratulated me on my husband’s ability to tolerate cold water. I tried to remain sanguine, though the reaction inside my own mind was, “Say what?!” I dutifully wrote it down in my field notes, figuring that eventually it might make sense.

In time, I pieced together that the house and hearth are women’s domain; the shade tree where gatherings take place (kok) is men’s domain; it’s effeminate to hang around the hearth too much; it’s manly (in a climate where it rains a lot and due to the altitude can get quite cold) not to mind exposure to the elements; therefore, real men don’t shiver. This sequence of associations seems bizarre at first, but upon reflection it is no more so than our own cultural notions of what is or is not suitable for “real men.” The Nandi believe a woman can make her husband weak-willed and subject to her control by feeding him polluting bodily substances (kerek, discussed later) or ground-up grass crabs. Inability to stand cold and frequent shivering are the outward signs of such poisoning.

The day after we moved in, I also got to bathe in the river and do laundry along with Rael and her friends. There was a spot at the river where a waist-deep pool of water collected. Rocks ringed this pool, shielding it from the view of anybody on the pathway, and this was the community bathing place. There was a signalling system (hanging clothes on the outer edge of the rocks) and an elaborate system of rules designed to protect everyone’s modesty. However, the Nandi definition of whose modesty needs protecting from whom—in other words, which categories of people may be unclothed in front of one another—differs markedly from our Euro-American expectations. Married women bathe
together; children bathe with them. Unmarried, uninitiated women are permitted to bathe together with young men of the warrior age-set or with married women. Young people of both sexes do not undress in front of men of their fathers’ age-set—and there are still more complications. I, along with the other married women, was expected to undress without compunction in front of anyone defined as a “child.” The problem was that boys are “children” as long as they remain uncircumcised, which can be as old as sixteen or eighteen. In practice, older boys generally joined the young, unmarried men, but that first day one of the “children” present was Rael’s thirteen-year-old son who was taller than I. It was difficult for me to take my clothes off in the presence of this strapping youth, but it was excellent practice in cultural relativism. “Relax,” I kept telling myself. “It’s no big deal. It doesn’t mean the same thing here as it would at home. The other women aren’t bothered…”

Another shock about gender norms—though one we had already dealt with during our stay in Nairobi—was the expectation of intimate touching between members of the same gender.Shortly after our arrival in Nairobi, a Kenyan couple from our research institute invited us to dinner. Over drinks, I sat with Georgia on one bench, and Leon sat with John on the other. “Have another drink,” Georgia said brightly as she draped her arm around my shoulders, stroking my arm, and leaning close across me to fill my glass. On the other side of the table, I noted that John’s hand was on Leon’s thigh as he inquired about his favorite authors. On the North American continent, we’d be enacting a swingers’ seduction scene—but in Kenya, this body language has no such meaning. In fact, the ideas that connect touching and sexuality are almost the opposite of Euro-American norms. A naive American visitor to Nairobi could easily assume that it’s a gay paradise on the basis of numerous same-sex couples strolling the sidewalks hand-in-hand. This would be totally wrong. The Kenyan attitude toward homosexuality is less tolerant than North Americans’. Holding hands or touching intimately in public is a way of declaring the absence of any possibility of a sexual relationship. If people are sexually interested in each other, they will refrain from touching. Husbands and wives are never seen touching in public. This restraint in touching each other was one of the most difficult things for us to get used to in the field situation—much more difficult than walking hand-in-hand with
our same-sex friends.

The public dominance of husband over wife and the wife’s overt submissiveness were more difficult to get used to, especially for me. One shows one’s husband “respect,” and never corrects, contradicts, shows anger, argues with him, or tells him what to do. One is also expected never to complain or say anything negative about a husband to anyone else, unless there is a very strong grievance. Husbands are also supposed to “respect” and refrain from complaining about their wives, but they are freer to contradict them, order them around, and even shout at them if there is provocation. As we became more intimately acquainted with several couples, we could see that behind the scenes their relationships were not as inegalitarian as this public façade made it seem. At any rate, I had difficulty keeping the public façade in place with never a crack, and I wondered if Leon’s cronies secretly pitied him for being married to such a shrew. Since I intended to study gender roles, it was lucky that some of the cultural differences that initially presented themselves most forcefully concerned gender. But there was still much to learn.

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**MALE AND FEMALE IN NANDI CULTURE**

Toward the end of our fieldwork, when I became pregnant with our first child, I confided to Rael that I was really hoping for a girl. “No, Gina!” she exclaimed. “Don’t tell anybody that! It’s an insult to your husband. For him, you must hope for a boy, even though there’s always a special love between mothers and daughters.” As in so many world cultures, males in Nandi are the preferred sex at birth. However, the preference is only slight. The ideal family includes sons and daughters. Sons continue the line of descent, but the bridewealth received when daughters are married enables their brothers to marry in turn.

Clearly, parents have different expectations of sons and daughters. Girls wear dresses; boys dress in shirts and shorts. Both sexes have major work responsibilities, but the tasks they are usually assigned are different. Girls are expected to care for younger children and help with weeding fields and domestic
chores, such as fetching water and firewood. Boys herd cattle and help with plowing, and perform miscellaneous errands and tasks. Boys’ chores take them further from the compound and give them more scope for independent action. Boys may care for children, and girls may herd cattle, if no child of the ideal age and sex is available. However, families try to arrange things so that a child of the appropriate sex is available, and this in part accounts for the widespread custom of fostering.

Every household needs a *cheplakwet* (child nurse) and a *mestowot* (herdboy). So essential are these roles that a newly married couple not living in an extended family will “borrow” children from other relatives or friends to fill them. Many Nandi adults I interviewed spent time as foster children. Some must have had positive experiences, but most children seem quite distressed at being taken away from their mothers and familiar surroundings. This is reflected in their evaluation of the experience; “cruel uncles” figure in many life histories and in folklore. The fostering family is responsible for feeding and clothing the child, and in the modern setting for paying school fees.

Until recently, boys were much more likely than girls to attend school. A daughter leaves her family for another at marriage; a son remains and the family benefits from any increased earning potential he gains through education. In 1976, surveying 241 adults, I found that most men (72 percent) had completed more than the equivalent of 4th grade, most women (63 percent) had completed only 4th grade or less, and 24 percent of men, but only 11 percent of women, had attended high school. Nowadays, with primary education free, boys and girls are educated at the primary level in equal numbers. Boys are still more likely to pursue secondary school and higher education, though the gender gap in education is narrowing.

Though Nandi mothers denied that male and female babies are inherently different at birth, substantial adult gender differences in basic character traits are acknowledged. Men are said to have greater physical endurance; to be *korom*, “fierce” (courageous in confronting enemies or wild animals—women must also be courageous and stoic in childbirth and in coping with injury or grief); to be more intelligent, foresightful, and decisive; to be more inclined than women to forgive without holding a grudge. Women are seen as more empathic than men, more capable of feeling “pity” (*rirgei*, “cry together”). These differences are
believed to be learned, but are also thought to be set in place and reinforced by initiation.

Adolescent initiation, especially of boys, is one of the most central Nandi institutions. Boys and girls are initiated between the ages of twelve and eighteen, most often fourteen or fifteen for girls and fifteen or sixteen for boys. The central feature of the process is male circumcision or female clitoridectomy. The mere thought of such operations makes my American students gasp and shudder. Yes, they are extremely painful, and they are meant to be. The initiates are expected to be brave, quiet, and unemotional throughout. Initiation is thought of consciously as a test of the courage and toughness needed for warfare (though it is now a thing of the past) or childbirth.

It’s worth digressing for a moment to discuss the issue of clitoridectomy, genital surgery involving the excision of all or part of the clitoris, and sometimes part of the external labia as well. This is a customary operation in many Subsaharan African societies, not to be confused with “infibulation” (practiced in northern Sudan), the partial sewing shut of the vaginal opening. Clitoridectomy has been in the news in the last several years, with concerned Westerners increasingly urging the UN to pressure its African member states to ban what is viewed as a “barbaric, primitive” custom hazardous to women’s health that denies them sexual pleasure. (It is argued that women are kept sexually faithful to unloving husbands by being kept from experiencing orgasm.) Certainly, there is partial truth in this criticism; deaths from infection and hemorrhage have occurred. I would point out, however, that these potential complications are also present for male circumcision, without producing any comparable international outcry. Initially, I struggled to keep my cultural relativism about me while confronting a people who, I was sure, robbed women of their sexuality. However, as I talked with women about the subject I discovered that they didn’t see it this way. Nandi women, even those with sexual experience before and after clitoridectomy, insisted that their sexual pleasure was unimpaired, and acted amused at my belief that the quality of their sex lives should be affected. Since orgasmic response in women increases with age, perhaps these women have the clitoris removed before they are really aware of what they will be missing. However, there is another feasible interpretation.

Though I don’t mean to be an apologist for clitoridectomy, I think that Western critics should consider the possibility that
African women know what they are talking about and whether (because of “phantom limb phenomenon” or some other mechanism) it may be that women are not robbed of pleasure. Physiological research is needed before we can conclude anything. In many societies with clitoridectomy, wives’ sexual infidelity is common. So clitoridectomy does not prevent adultery, contrary to the Western interpretation. The importance of abolishing clitoridectomy should be decided by African feminists (they have mostly not seen it as their highest priority). In any case, the ritual that includes clitoridectomy is usually an important focus of women’s solidarity that may not be replaced easily.

Clitoridectomy has been illegal in Kenya for several years. Prior to this, Christian missionaries had been preaching against the practice for many years with some success. At the time I was in the field in 1976 about twenty percent of women in their twenties and thirties, primarily those with secondary education, but also some with higher levels of primary education, had refused to have the operation. Some women who had been traditionally initiated told me that they didn’t see that they had gained anything much from it and wouldn’t choose it again if they had the choice.

Girls’ initiation takes place individually or in groups of two to four, in the family compound. The girls are outfitted in a standard costume for the occasion: a red skirt, men’s white dress shirt, tie, a tall helmet, crossed bandoliers trimmed with colobus monkey fur and beads, knee socks, and athletic shoes. Many of these elements are associated either with the traditional dress of warriors, or with contemporary roles (e.g., the military, athletics, business) associated with men. Though women direct the ceremony, costuming is in the hands of male specialists. (Gender role reversals are seen in both female and male initiation. They include aspects of initiates’ dress, men carrying water for the women, and, during girls’ initiation, women attacking men physically with sticks.)

The ritual begins in the late afternoon. The girls dance through the night, accompanied by a group of younger girls. Guests visit throughout the night, and a crowd assembles in the morning, after dawn. The initiates distribute small gifts (candy, cigarettes, and so on) to the guests, and then a group of initiated women moves away from the main crowd and forms a circle in which the operation is performed. If the girl shows courage, the older women break from the circle and dash toward the crowd, whooping and ululating, to congratulate the male members of the
families and drape them with *sinendet*, a ritually important plant. Singing, dancing, and celebrating continue all day. The initiates are secluded in neighboring compounds for several weeks, and are not to be seen again until their marriages are arranged.

Male circumcision is an important mark of both adult status and ethnic identity. Nandi ridicule ethnic groups whose men are uncircumcised. Male initiation is a community-wide event with larger numbers of initiates (ten to fifteen) than in female initiation. Men of the next older age-set supervise the process, which in many ways resembles fraternity pledging. Beginning in the morning, the boys have their heads shaved, are forced to behave submissively, are harangued and verbally abused, are made to perform “women’s work” such as carrying water and firewood, and to sing and dance before the assembled crowd. At intervals, they are taken into a secluded grove for “secret instruction.”

As sunset approaches the boys appear for the last time, and women friends and family members tie scarves around their necks as tokens of their moral support, since women may not be present at the actual circumcision. During the night the boys undergo minor tortures and physical hazing, building up to the operation itself in the pre-dawn hour. The women of their families sit up all night waiting around bonfires in the public ceremonial space. Just before dawn, some of the circumcision “instructors” reappear to return the headscarves and drape the women in *sinendet*. At a ceremony I attended, some women refused to accept the tokens until they were assured that their sons had been as brave as they could possibly have been. Moments later, as the first rays of the sun appeared above the horizon, all those assembled dropped to their knees facing it and sang a traditional Nandi hymn. The boys—now young men—remain together in seclusion until their wounds have healed, receiving instruction in traditional lore.

For young men, initiation marks the onset of a period of social freedom and intense sexual activity. Traditionally, this would also have been a time of high risk-taking as the new warriors went out on cattle raids to prove their mettle and began to amass their own herds. Today, very often, they are students, and otherwise exempt from adult responsibilities. In the late nineteenth century, the young men of each neighborhood slept in a communal barracks, often accompanied by their lovers, girls not yet old enough for initiation. These couples were free to engage in all forms of sex-play except actual penetration without any social stigma—girls were expected to be technically
virgin at the time of their initiation. At present, young men have their own huts in their parents’ compounds, and there is no disapproval of young uninitiated women spending nights in their boyfriends’ huts.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

For men, initiation marks the entry into one of seven age-sets (*ibinda*, pl. *ibinwek*). The names of the age-sets are always the same, and rotate through time: Kaplelach, Kipkoimet, Sawe, Chuma, Maina, Nyongi, and Kimnyigei. At any time there are four sets of elders, the “senior warriors”, the initiates, and a set of boys. When all in the oldest age-set have died, its name comes back into use as the name of the set of the new initiates.

All men who are circumcised within a certain period of time belong to the same age-set. Since age at circumcision varies, at the margins of age-sets there may be some overlap of ages, with the oldest members of a junior set being older than the youngest members of the next senior set. The age-set members move as a unit through the life-cycle (like “The Class of 1998” moving from freshmen to sophomores, juniors, and seniors). During the 1800s there was a huge centralized ritual in which every Nandi man moved on to the next status: initiates became senior warriors, senior warriors became elders, senior elders “retired” from active life, and a new age-set began for boys about to be initiated. Immediately afterwards, the new warriors would launch a series of raids as a way of proving themselves.

The colonial government banned this event, fearing it would lead to military uprisings, and after independence it never made a comeback. Informal discussions among elders of different locales now produce consensus on which age-set is being initiated.

There is a strong sense of solidarity within age-sets, and a tendency for the members to act as a unit in taking on activities such as community improvement projects. The idea of unity is especially strong among those men who were initiated together in the same ceremony (called a *mat*, or “fire”). They are likely to have strong bonds of friendship for their whole lives, and provide
mutual aid and support. I once went with a young Nandi man to visit another young man. When we arrived he was not at home, and his door was closed. My friend walked in, and decided since his shirt was dirty to trade it for a clean one he found inside. I expressed surprise, but he responded, “Why should I not take anything I need? He’s my age-mate. I am free to take whatever he has.” It is said that in the past it was common and condoned for a man to have sex with his age-mate’s wife.

Relations among members of different age-sets are controlled by definite rules of etiquette. Men of younger sets defer to men of older sets. Sons should not belong to the age-set adjacent to that of their father, but to the next lower one. Familiarity between members of these age-sets is avoided. A man may not marry his age-mate’s daughter, nor a woman her father’s age-mate.

There are no age-sets for women, and no one I interviewed remembered hearing that they had ever existed, though they exist or are reported to have existed among several peoples related to the Nandi. Groups of women around the same age are often referred to as “Wives of . . .” with the name of a men’s age-set.

The Nandi have extended families and clans with animal totems. Descent or membership in a family or clan is traced patrilineally (through males only). The clans’ only function is the regulation of marriage. Certain clans do not marry members of certain other clans, though ritual elders told me that the pattern of marriage rules is continually shifting, depending on what inter-clan marriages have been successful in the recent past. The kin term system is basically the Omaha type common in patrilineal societies: the term “father” is used for all men of the same generation within a person’s own descent group, the term for “sibling” for patrilineal relatives of one’s own generation, and one’s mother’s patrilineal kinsmen of all generations are called by a single term. One of the most interesting aspects of Nandi terminology is the rich vocabulary for different kinds of relatives by marriage, since relationships with close in-laws are much more important than distant “blood” relationships.

Marital residence is patrilocal; that is, a bride moves in with her husband’s family. Communities are not, however, based on kinship. Traditionally, families could move into any locality where they would be sponsored by people already living there—relatives, in-laws, age-mates, or others. Now with private land-
ownership, people move into communities where they can buy land.

Traditionally, the local community (koret), consisting of several hundred people, was the most important unit of day-to-day life, the site of ceremonial and economic cooperation and dispute settlement. The term for the community’s council of elders, kowet, is used for both the council and the territorial unit, which might be called a “neighborhood.” In the modern political scheme, several such units make up a sublocation, with a government-appointed subchief. Sublocations combine to form locations, each with a chief. The unit immediately larger than the kowet was the pororiet, called a “regimental area” because its warriors formed a single fighting unit. The pororiet council, which made decisions about matters of concern to the local communities, such as warfare, circumcision, and planting, was made up of representatives from each kowet council, and two representatives each from the warriors and the Orkoiyot.1

The Orkoiyot was a religious/political figure—a kind of chief, though his power was more ritual than political. This hereditary office created some political centralization for all the Nandi for a short time, probably no longer than from a bit after mid-nineteenth century to the British Conquest. The main function of the Orkoiyot was to coordinate military activities and sanction cattle raids. Warriors planning a raid would ask the Orkoiyot (who was believed to foresee the future) to predict its outcome. They would stage the raid only if he predicted success, and thank him with a gift of captured cattle. In Nandi tradition the family of the Orkoiyot descended from powerful Maasai ilaibonik (ritual experts with paranormal powers), who immigrated to Nandi and were absorbed into the Talai clan. However, the Maasai also believe that their ilaibonik came from elsewhere, perhaps from Nandi, so the Nandi story may not be based on fact.

Prior to the emergence of the Orkoiyot as a political figure, the term orkoiyot was used to denote any man thought to have paranormal powers including the ability to foretell the future, to see things happening at a distance, to disappear and reappear somewhere else, and to control the weather and the health and fertility of humans and animals. The ability was thought to run in families and to be patrilineally inherited by men only. The
institution of the Chief Orkoiyot was based on this model writ large. The orkoiik (plural of orkoiyot) of the Talai clan were believed to be more powerful than others, and people feared them because of the harm they could do to those who resisted their will. Talai men often had several wives because of the practice of “naming wives.” A Talai stated his desire to marry a certain woman, with the implied threat to curse any other man who might try to win her. This abuse of power was resented by non-Talai. Other Nandi were not completely cowed, however, and there are stories of Orkooiik who displeased their constituencies being put to death—in one case, for example, an Orkooiyot erroneously predicted success for a raid in which many Nandi lives were lost.

Most Nandi still believe to some extent in the power of the Talai. One young Talai man told me that though his father and grandfather definitely could use Talai powers, he couldn’t because of his Western education. In another case, a girl broke up with her Talai boyfriend, and he threatened (not jokingly) to curse other men she might take an interest in. Another highly educated man told an anecdote about his sister, who married into the Talai. She was astounded and upset one day when she couldn’t find her first son, an infant not yet crawling. Her mother-in-law said, “Didn’t you know? That’s what Talai babies do—come and go as they please.” Non-Talai are ambivalent in their feelings about the Talai. On the one hand, there is still some resentment over their past abuse of power. On the other, the Talai Orkoiyot who rallied the Nandi to resist the British is viewed as a glorious historical figure, and his descendants and those of other famous orkoiik bask in reflected glory.

**RELIGION**

There were a variety of minor supernatural beings in traditional Nandi cosmology, but most worship focussed on a single deity called Asis or Cheptalel (and other names). Nandi believed that ancestral spirits continued to exist after death, but they were relatively unimportant in human affairs.

Missionaries have long been active in Nandi District. Since the Nandi were monotheists for all practical purposes, it was not
difficult for them to assimilate Christianity into their beliefs. “Jehovah” is equivalent to Asis; that God had a son was news, but not hard to accept. More difficult to accept were teachings concerning sexuality, polygyny, initiation, and similar issues. Most Nandi Christians are Roman Catholics, though many are also adherents of the Africa Inland Church. The Africa Inland Mission, with ties to Baptists and Methodists, translated the Bible into Nandi in 1925. Some Nandi are Anglicans and Seventh Day Adventists. Nandi are less likely than neighboring ethnic groups to join African independent churches. In 1977 over sixty percent of household heads in the community I lived in were at least nominal Christians. Most Nandi continue to believe that certain people can “bewitch” others, primarily through envy.

**Marriage**

For women, marriage took place shortly after initiation and for the most part still does. The average age at marriage for women in my census was 17.8. Young men, following initiation, spent a period of about twelve to fifteen years as warriors, and did not marry until most of this time had elapsed. Today, with peace, men’s average age at marriage is younger, in the early twenties.

Ideally, a girl in seclusion following initiation waits for people to come seeking her as a bride on behalf of a young man. This is known as coming for “engagement” (*koito*). This group, the “engagement party,” contains both women and men, including the prospective groom’s parents, uncles, aunts, and older siblings, and close friends and relatives, at least some of whom know both families well. On the second visit, the girl’s family makes sure to also have relatives and friends assembled, and the two groups get down to negotiating details of the proposal. There is no formal marriage contract, but information on such matters as how many cattle the groom has or stands to inherit, where the couple will live, and so on, is sought. The exact amount (which varies only slightly) of the bridewealth to be paid, in cattle, sheep and goats, and money, is also negotiated. Women in the engagement parties negotiate almost as actively as the men.

Ultimately, the bride must observe the prospective groom from behind a screen, and it is the responsibility of the father’s
sister to ensure that she finds the man acceptable. If she really dislikes him, she can hold out against the arrangement; however, girls are sometimes pressured into accepting less than ideal matches. In reality, when a girl is initiated her marriage may already be arranged, at least informally (after talks between the two mothers). Romantic-ally involved couples can arrange in this way to be married, and this is becoming more popular.

Marriages between people whose families live in the same community are common. Sisters, in particular, try to marry men who live near each other, so that they will be able easily to turn to each other for assistance. There is a term, lemenyi, for men married to sisters, and this relationship is supposed to be close and supportive. Friends and age-mates sometimes try to arrange to marry sisters, and thus become lemenyi.

Nandi men and women expect that the husband will be the dominant partner. In public, wives behave submissively toward husbands, though often private behavior is more egalitarian. Marriage is usually a fairly harmonious give-and-take, though even a wife who has a lot of influence with her husband will ask his permission to do anything out of the ordinary. The husband has the right to punish the wife physically for “misbehavior,” in particular for public disrespect. A Nandi college student told me that he did not like this aspect of his culture, but admitted that he might have to buy into it. “It depends on what she does. If she does certain things, I will have to beat her or people will lose respect for me.” Both men and women spend more social time with same-sex friends than with their spouses, but socializing as couples is becoming more common among younger, educated people.

The payment of bridewealth by the groom’s to the bride’s family is the central act that creates a marriage among East African pastoralists. Nandi bridewealth is lower than most, at five to seven cattle, one or a few sheep and goats, varying amounts of cowrie shells (an item sometimes omitted now), and cash generally equal to the value of a cow. When families negotiate bridewealth, specific animals are indicated by name, and attention is paid to the history of their social exchange. It is important to include at least one cow from the bridewealth given for the groom’s father’s sister, or its progeny. If the groom’s full sister is married, an animal received as her bridewealth is given. At the wedding feast, the animals are displayed so that the bride’s brothers can come later to take them
The cattle given as bridewealth for a daughter should be used for the marriages of, or inherited by, only her full brothers. Each of a man’s wives is the founder of a separate genealogical unit called a “house,” and holds cattle separately from any other wives. At her marriage, a woman is given some of her husband’s cattle to serve as the basis of her “house-property” herd. This herd also includes animals her relatives give her as wedding gifts, and grows through natural increase, further allocations from her husband, the addition of cattle she can sometimes acquire herself, and bridewealth given for daughters. In any decisions concerning house-property cattle, a wife must consult with her husband; he also is not supposed to sell, give away, or do anything with them without consulting with her. A husband, however, usually has cattle that have not been allotted to the house of any of his wives, and these are his to do with as he pleases. While husbands therefore have greater property rights than wives, they do not have complete control of family property. Nandi women told me that wives have the right to go to any lengths to prevent their husbands from taking their house-property cattle. In one instance, the wife took her complaint to the community elders and stopped the sale of her cow. In some other African “house-property” systems, husbands have greater freedom to dispose of their wives’ cattle.

Cattle that husbands inherited were traditionally allocated as house-property in equal numbers to all wives. Today, this norm has been extended to forms of property such as land and money. Cattle gained in raids belonged to the husband, and this has been extended to cover cattle a man buys with money gained through wage labor. Many families sell low-milk-producing African cattle from the house-property herd and use the proceeds plus the wage-labor earnings to replace them with European dairy breeds. It is not always clear what rights each partner has in the new animals, and this has the potential to create conflict between spouses.

As in most African societies, marrying more than one wife was a mark of status for a Nandi man. Many men now claim that as Christians they have no intention of marrying second wives. Analysis of census data shows, however, that with age controlled, Christians are only slightly less likely to be polygynists than Nandi traditionalists. With private land ownership, it
is becoming difficult for a man to provide adequate land inheritance for the family of more than one wife. Seventeen percent of married men in my census were polygynists. (For Nandi District as a whole, the figure could be closer to twenty-five percent.) Wives have no right to object to their husbands’ marrying other wives, and some desire it. As in other societies, relations among co-wives may be friendly, neutral, or hostile, depending on individual personalities. I have observed physical battles between co-wives, and I have also seen them spring to one another’s defense in conflicts with their mutual husband. Nandi folk-wisdom says that jealousy between co-wives is inevitable, and that their husband should arrange, if possible, for them to live far apart.

Traditionally, a marriage was not considered irrevocable until after the birth of the first child. After that point, divorce was commonly considered to be impossible. There was a divorce procedure, but no one could give any hypothetical circumstances under which it might be used. A Nandi woman, once married, is forever the wife of the man who first married her, and all children she bears are considered his children, even if she has not seen him for years. A widow is not free to remarry; if she has further children, the father is considered to be her original husband, and it is his property that her sons inherit. A young widow is expected to practice the levirate, cohabiting with a kinsman of her husband, who begets children regarded as those of her dead husband. Though this is the “respectable” thing to do, it is not required. A widow might, rather, take lovers of her own choice. Not being able to divorce an unbearable husband or legitimately remarry seems like a great infringement of a woman’s freedom. However, the other side of the situation is that once-in-a-lifetime marriage gives her and her children exceptionally strong rights in her husband’s property.

The Nandi also practice woman-woman marriage. Such marriages are about three percent of all marriages, and this incidence does not seem to be declining. Though each married woman holds a separate fund of property and is expected to become the founder of a “house,” only sons, never daughters, may inherit property. If the house has no male heir, its property goes to sons of co-wives or of the husband’s brother, but this is a very distasteful alternative. What to do? The Nandi solution is for the heirless woman to become the “female husband” to a
younger woman, and “father” to her children; the sons of the younger woman become the heirs of the house. Once when I asked a man something about his father he told me, “The woman who married my mother was my father. She acted just like any other father.” (Note that the father-child relationship is normally distant.) The culture insists that the female husband becomes a man. She must discontinue sexual relations with men. Though she has no sexual relationship with her wife, she has all the other rights of a husband. Her wife should cook for her and do all the domestic work. Outside the home, there is considerable ambiguity about whether female husbands in fact act like men in ways they claim are permitted to them, such as participating in political meetings and attending male initiation. Some female husbands did make a point of frequenting the “men’s side” in the local beer hall (there are no longer beer halls since sale of African-style beer is now illegal.) It might be more accurate to see female husbands as occupying an ambiguous gender status, while they and others go to great rhetorical lengths to argue that they are in fact men.

Another alternative when there is no heir for house property is for a daughter of the house to “marry the center-post.” She thus becomes like a daughter-in-law rather than a daughter. She remains at home and takes lovers, and her sons are the heirs.

Childbirth usually takes place at home, attended by local midwives, though some women now go to the hospital in the District Center. Women in labor are expected to be very stoic. I watched a young woman give birth without even a whimper, though pain was etched clearly on her face. In another instance, a woman behaved in a cowardly way during labor, and this became the subject of amused gossip and a lot of teasing for a long time afterward. Childbirth is “women’s business,” and men are expected to stay away from the house at this time, waiting nearby with other men for news of the birth. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is said, the father would not resume living in the house for months, and would not touch the child or have sex with the mother again until the child was weaned and could walk. Fathers thus had very little intimate contact with young children; older children were expected to treat their fathers with respectful formality. The father-child relationship was important, but not warm and close. With regard to cross-cultural variation in men’s participation in child-rearing,
the Nandi were probably toward the extreme non-participation end of the spectrum.

Part of the reason for this distance between fathers and children was the belief in *kerek*, a mystical substance that was thought to emanate from infants and nursing women and was ritually polluting to men. Informants gave me contradictory information about sources of the pollution: the child’s urine or feces, or the mother’s milk. In any case, close contact with either the mother or the child could make the father (and perhaps other men) lose skill with weapons, become weak-willed and indecisive, and shiver in the cold. Wives could cook for their husbands while nursing only after going through a lengthy process of ritual washing with river sand and cow-dung, and returning home without touching their bodies or clothes; the *cheplakwet* (child nurse) held the baby until after the mother cooked. If an unweaned child touched an object in the house, it was traded to a childless neighbor for a similar object. A favorite anecdote of old women was how their husbands used to spy on them to make sure they were thorough enough in their ritual washing. Some people now claim that all this was merely superstition, not real; others argue that kerek, though real, became a matter of less concern with the introduction of soap, which dissipates it very effectively. In any case, men now rarely hesitate about having contact with children, and most people say this is a positive change. It is also true that births are now spaced much more closely and families are larger; men’s fear of kerek was probably a mechanism that helped to keep the birth rate down, even though the Nandi ideal was always to have as many children as possible.

**DIVISION OF LABOR**

All family members have a part in the process of production. Men clear ground for planting and initially break it, in the past with iron-bladed hoes, today with an ox-drawn plow. It takes a team of two men to plow, one to drive the oxen with a whip, and one to hold the plow. The only instance of a woman plowing that I ever saw was Rael helping a man she hired to plow a field for vegetables she was growing to sell. Most people rent a tractor for a second round of plowing, and this is a source of
cash for households in the community that own tractors (five in 1977). All ages and sexes plant and harvest, usually in cooperative work groups larger than one household. Cultivation during the growing cycle is done by both sexes, and women spend slightly more time at agricultural activities than do men. Cattle herding is mostly done by children, but women (more than men) also participate. Women and children do most of the milking.

Most men try to find some sort of full-time or part-time employment, but jobs are not plentiful in rural areas. Many men not formally employed, however, engage in some kind of entrepreneurial activity: agricultural contract labor for large landholders, cattle trading, charcoal making, dredging sand from rivers to sell for making concrete, and so on. There are also some skilled artisans with shops in the local center, for example, a tailor and a bicycle repairman. Only a few women engage in such activities or have jobs. Profit from the sale of cash crops—maize, tea, and milk—goes to male household heads, who are supposed to use it for the benefit of the household. Women often grow vegetables for sale, or sell chickens and eggs. Women are said to “own” chickens (sometimes called “the cattle of women”), vegetables, and the afternoon milk, which is for family consumption. (Morning milk, which belongs to men, is marketed through the Kenya Co-operative Creameries.) Women’s biggest source of cash in 1976–1977 was brewing and selling maize beer. In the 1980s a ban on selling beer cut off this income source.

**Changes**

Each return to Nandi sees more changes: individualized kerosene-powered water pumps, generators, an occasional television, new roads, telephone service in rural village post offices, even the possibility of rural electrification in the not-too-distant future. Changes on the social level occur too, as greater educational opportunities bring new ideas. Which are “good” and which “bad” depends on one’s personal perspective. Increasing incorporation into the cash economy has brought material wealth to many Nandi, especially as the Nandi are land-wealthy by rural Kenyan
standards and live in an agriculturally rich area. The corollary, however, is a growing gap between rich and poor, as some prosper more than others. Improved medical technology has lowered infant mortality—something women often mention as an improvement over the “old days.” But less infant death means population growth and increasing land shortage (so far less acute in Nandi than in many other areas). In terms of gender, the idea of companionate marriage has taken hold among the educated elite, but women may be losing the right to independent control of property. Nevertheless, some things will not change. I expect that the land will always be beautiful, and the people always warm, friendly, and proud of their distinct Nandi heritage.

**Notes**


**Suggested Readings**


Oboler, Regina Smith. “Is the Female Husband a Man? Woman/
