

Stories of Tribal Warfare

Preparation

Warriors usually were between the ages of 18 and 40. There were rules that all warriors had to observe, especially when preparing for war. For instance, in some places they were not to associate with women. They had to know how to handle the various weapons they were to use. They had to know how to hold the shield in various positions to defend themselves against the enemies' spears.

In some sub-tribes, young men of between 18 and 21 were taken to camp for some weeks in a year and trained in the various rules and techniques of war. Here, in addition to the general rules of warfare, they would learn that women were not to be speared in a war. Other persons that were not to be killed were: a messenger of an enemy tribe who came to announce a war; or a messenger of an enemy tribe who came to announce the surrender of his tribe.

War captives were usually made slaves. The men had to become *abasumba* to work for their master. In time, if they were good, they would be given a plot of land and maybe a wife too, so as to make their own homes. Captured children were made to grow up as members of the new tribe, though they kept their clan names. Girls and women were often married without any bride price.

Many Luhya villages were protected either by a wall, or by a ditch (*olukoba*), or both. These went all round the village, and were useful in resisting raiders who came at night. These raiders were mostly Nandi, Masai and Teso.

WARRIORS UNIFORMS AND WEAPONS

When going to war, the warriors usually painted themselves so as to look as frightening as possible. Some wore horns on their heads and feathers. The weapons consisted of spears and special javelins. Sometimes these were attached to a long string so that, after spearing an enemy, the spear could be pulled back again and used once more. A fight with spears required shields for protection. These were cleverly made out of the hides of certain animals, notably the buffalo. At the back of the shield was often painted the symbol of the clan of the warrior.

Arrows were also used, especially by sub-tribes neighbouring the Nandi or Masai. Swords and special knives, as well as clubs, were also used.

LOCAL WARFARE

Tribal wars were fought only locally. That is, often a clan fought a neighbouring enemy clan, or a tribe fought a neighbouring enemy tribe. Usually the war did not spread very far, and some wars consisted only of one battle. A few wars, however, were big and spread to other places, thus involving many people. An example of this is the war of '*Eshiatikho*' which is described below.

Many of the tribal wars in Luhyaland were caused by cattle raids from neighbouring non-Luhya tribes. The Teso fought many wars against the Babukusu and the Bakhayo and even penetrated into Samia. The Luos fought wars against the Luhya groups neighbouring them, for instance near Maseno and Luanda in Bunyore, near Musanda in Mumias and in Usonga.

The Nandi fought the Luhya in Kabras, Isukha and Tiriki; while the Masai of Uasin Gishu used to make regular raids on the Luhya to steal cattle.

Local wars within Luhyaland were mainly caused when the young men of a tribe or a clan kidnapped a girl of another clan or tribe; or when they killed a member of another clan or tribe who was passing through their territory.

THE WAR OF ESHIATIKHO

The war of *eshiatikho* is of special interest to all Luhya because it led to great changes in the arrangement of clans and sub-tribes. It is known as the war of '*Ifunikho*' in some parts and as the war of '*Eshiatikho*' in others, notably in Kabras and Bunyala in the Kakamega area.

This war occurred in Bunyala in Busia near Lake Victoria, between the Rivers Nzoia and Yala. It was really a war waged by all the clans of the area against the Abakhoone, a powerful clan which lived close to the mouth of River Yala called Ndekwe. The Abakhoone had fought and expelled many clans from nearby. These clans had to leave the area and cross River Sio to the area of Busia in Uganda.

Others had to go to Luo country. Those who remained near the Abakhoone continually suffered from the cruelties of this clan. So, around 1800 circa they organized themselves against the clan. The following clans took an active part in getting rid of Abakhoone: Abalwani, Abaniatseke, Ababoro, Abang'oma, Abamulembo, Abamakhia, Abanyifwa, Abanyekera, Abasinyama, Abayineki and Abakhumatsi.

They knew that singly they were not able to defeat the fierce Abakhoone so they held a war council. The war council decided to fetch a medicineman from Mfang'ano Island in Lake Victoria. A member of the Abalwani clan, whose name was Simwero, was the one who went to fetch him. He was eager to do this job because his brother called Obwori had been cruelly murdered by the Abakhoone, who had removed a rib from him and left him to die in pain. This was their common cruel way of killing people in peace time.

The medicineman came at last. His medicine was called *omusala kwe ifulu* (the medicine of the little fish). Simwero brought him to a place called Sigomere in the home of Abamatseke clan. There he performed his witchcraft. He killed a goat which had drunk medicine, and its carcass was placed secretly in the olukoba (ditch) of the Abakhoone one near a place called Syanzofwe.

The Abakhoone picked up the animal and ate it in merriment; which was all according to plan. Within a day, all of them fell sick, and the other clans declared war upon them.

Now the Abakhoone had many famous warriors. There was Mufuula, the one-eyed general. There was Esakha, the fastest runner of them all. And then there was Matsaba, among others. The Abakhoone knew that as long as these brave soldiers were alive, no clan or combination of clans would defeat them.

The first battle of this war was fought in Syanzofwe, which is a flat, open space near the southern bank of River Nzoia and about two miles from its mouth.

None of the veteran warriors of the Abakhoone went to this battle. They left the younger men to fight the weak clans which they had learnt to despise. They themselves remained home to bury their dead who had died so mysteriously.

That first battle was a victory for the united clans. They were led by a brave warrior called Makanda of the Abamulembo clan, a brother of the chief of the united clans. Makanda and his army were ruthless and determined, and the Abakhoone had to retreat in confusion. This was the first defeat the Abakhoone had suffered for many, many generations, and it was a great shock to them. In the next battle Matsaba was sent to lead their army. But it was all in vain. Nearly the whole battalion was wiped out and Matsaba himself was killed.

The Abakhoone now realized that the war was a serious matter and that they were in danger of being defeated. They sent a greater force to the next battle, but that too was wiped out. So in the following battle Mufuula himself had to lead the Abakhoone army assisted by Esakha.

As soon as the battle started, Mufuula was speared to death and Esakha and the rest of the army fled in confusion to hide in the Yala swamp with their frightened families. They were pursued and many were speared like animals. They were hunted throughout the night. Some had been foolish enough to flee with their hens and cocks. Their whereabouts were found when the cocks began to crow, and they were attacked and killed. The survivors do not eat chicken, wherever they are found, to the present day. The whereabouts of the others was known when the little bells (tsindeke) on the children's wrists and ankles sounded. This has led to some groups of Abakhoone holding indeke as taboo.

Those who managed to escape fled to far off places - Bukusu (where you find Namajanja's family), Bukhayo, Samia-Bugwe in Uganda, Bunyuli in Uganda, and Mfaang'ano Island in Lake Victoria. As they moved, other clans had to flee too, ahead of them; and a rearrangement of clans in the whole of Luhyaland was the result.

THE WAR OF CHETAMBE

When the British began to introduce colonial government in Kenya, they received strong resistance from some tribes. In Luhyaland, those who resisted most were the Babukusu. Between 1894 and 1898 they caused much trouble against the Sudanese soldiers who had been hired by the British. The most memorable of these battles was fought at Chetambe's fort, near Broderick Falls (renamed Webuye Falls). Actually, Chetambe's fort belonged to the Tachoni, but the Babukusu entered it while escaping.

The government collected together a large army consisting of Sudanese troops, many Masai warriors, and one thousand Baganda soldiers led by the famous Kakungulu.

The large army marched from South Bukusu towards Bungoma, shooting and frightening people. By the time the troops reached Bungoma, the Babukusu were so frightened that they fled desperately towards the east, across the plain between Bungoma and Broderick Falls. The government forces raced after them. Many women and children could not keep up the fast pace and gave up running away altogether. Some of them were shot by the passing troops.

When the first Babukusu reached Chetambe's fort, the Tachoni owners ran away to hide in the forests to the east making it easy for the Babukusu to occupy the fort. When the government forces arrived, they found several thousand Babukusu men, women and children in the fort. After several hours of trying to shoot down the fort, the government forces jumped over the low wall facing the east and shot everyone they found still alive inside.

So many people were killed that the rest of the Babukusu gave up the resistance against the British. The Babukusu composed a song about the battle of Chetambe: 'Khwafwa Khwabuna eee nga lumerera, wa Chetambe eee nga lumerera eee.'

Source: *Life in Kenya in the Olden Days: The Baluyia*, By John Osogo, Oxford University Press, 1965, ISBN 0 19 644012 2