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Liquid Material Culture: Following the Flow of Beer among the Luo of Kenya¹

Archaeologists have become increasingly interested in studying drinking practices in ancient societies recently because a focus on this aspect of past social systems has been shown to provide an extremely revealing window of entry for the analysis of many kinds of social relations and processes (Dietler 1990; Dietler & Hayden 2001; Vencel 1994). This has been especially evident, for example, in the exploration of phenomena ranging from the micropolitics and political economy underlying the consumption of Mediterranean imports and funerary ritual in European Iron Age societies (e.g. Arnold 1999; Dietler 1990; 1999) to the operation of imperial politics in Andean states (e.g. Goldstein 2003; Moore 1989; Morris 1979). However, the effectiveness of this line of archaeological inquiry depends crucially upon both the improvement of our theoretical understanding of alcohol as a cultural and social artifact and the establishment of diagnostic criteria that enable the detection of alcohol consumption and production in archaeological contexts. These developments rely, in turn, upon research on drinking in ethnographic contexts where the entire ›social life‹ of alcohol can be observed. Fortunately, there has been a surge of research interest in the subject by cultural anthropologists over the past couple of decades (e.g. see Douglas 1987; Gefou-Madianou 1992; Heath 2000), and the growing body of such studies now offers a wealth of cross-cultural comparative insights that are of significant analogical aid to archaeologists in interpreting drinking behavior in ancient contexts. One problem, however, is that ethnographic studies often have neglected the material aspects of drinking that are so crucial to archaeologists as they try to link their material remains to past human action. This has stimulated some scholars to undertake ›ethnoarchaeological‹ research on alcohol to bridge this gap, thereby adding an important new dimension to alcohol research in general (e.g. Arthur 2003; Bowser 2003; Herbich 1991). The current paper is intended as a modest contribution to this endeavor, offering a brief analysis of alcohol among the Luo people of Kenya.

1 We take great pleasure in being able to offer this article in honor of our friend Manfred Eggert for his *Festschrift*. The theme seems appropriate given both his long-term research interest in Africa and the fact that the social understanding of alcohol has become increasingly important in his other main research domain in Iron Age Europe. Our thanks to Hans-Peter Wotzka for the invitation to join this volume. Thanks are also due to the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Boise Fund of Oxford University, the Office of the President of Kenya, the National Museums of Kenya, and, especially, our Luo hosts and our research assistants, Rhoda Onyango, Monica Oyier, and the late Elijah Ogutu.

This paper starts from the premise that alcohol is best understood as a liquid form of material culture – but, more importantly, as a form of what may be called ›embodied material culture‹ (Dietler 2001). That is, alcohol is a substance produced specifically for destructive consumption by ingestion into the human body. As such, alcohol, like food, is a form of ›highly condensed social fact‹ embodying relations of production and exchange and linking the domestic and political economies in a highly personalized way (see Appadurai 1981, 494). Drinking is always far more than simply a biological act. Rather, it is a learned *technique du corps* (Mauss 1935) – a culturally patterned technique of bodily comportment that is expressive in fundamental ways of identity and difference. Furthermore, alcoholic beverages frequently have a privileged role in feasts (rituals of commensal consumption) because they are essentially food with certain psychoactive properties resulting from an alternative means of preparation that tend to amplify their significance in the important dramaturgical aspects of ritual. Moreover, this property of fermentation as a quasi-magical transformation of food into a substance that, in turn, transforms human consciousness augments the symbolic value of alcohol in the common liminal aspects of rituals (see Dietler 1990; 2001).

As with other forms of material culture, it is necessary to trace the full ›social life‹ (Appadurai 1986) of alcohol, from production through consumption, in order to understand its complex social roles and cultural significance. But, it is important to reiterate that following the flow of drink in a society should reveal its material dimension as fully as its symbolic significance. Drinking is not simply the consumption of free-floating signs in an abstract semiotic system: it is the carnal consumption of a material substance formed by the hard labor of production, and the specific properties derived from this fact have important implications for the entire political economy. Hence, archaeologically useful insights can best be obtained by investigating the material dimensions of alcohol production and consumption and situating these within the social and economic practices, relations, and institutions of which drinking is an integral part. Again, as with other types of material culture, the *chaîne opératoire* offers a useful method for undertaking this kind of analysis (Dietler & Herbich 1998; Jennings et al. 2005). This approach is illustrated here by focusing on the particular case of the Luo people of Kenya.

The Luo

The Luo are a Nilotic-speaking people with an agrarian subsistence base inhabiting a territory of approximately 10,000 square kilometers surrounding the Winam Gulf of Lake Victoria in western Kenya (see Herbich 2002). Our ethnoarchaeological research, of approximately three years duration, was focused particularly on Siaya District, the roughly one third of Luo territory located north of the Gulf. This was supplemented by more limited sojourns in the rest of Luoland (South Nyanza and Kisumu Districts). At the time of our study, the Luo population numbered about 2.5 million. Regional population density is relatively high, but the settlement pattern is one of discreet, polygynous, extended family homesteads dispersed over the landscape. Membership in agnatic lineages structures most features of social life, including personal identity, rights to land, and political alliances (Dietler & Herbich 1993; Evans-Pritchard 1949; Shipton 1989; Southall 1952). In addition to being patrilineal, the Luo have a strongly patrilocal system of post-marital residence in which brides come to live in the homestead of the husband's father.

The typical Luo homestead (called *dala* or *pacho*, depending on the area) consists of a roughly circular enclosure surrounded by a tall euphorbia hedge fence with a central gate (*rangach*). Inside are the houses of a polygynous extended family: the residents of a homestead consist of a man and his wives, and his sons and their wives. Each woman has her

own house, and these are placed in a symbolically charged pattern that emphasizes relations of seniority and authority: the powerful first wife's house is directly opposite the main gate, and the other co-wives follow in succession in descending order of seniority, alternating from side to side of the *dala* (Dietler & Herbich 1998; Herbich & Dietler 1993).

Subsistence among the Luo is based upon a combination of agriculture, livestock herding, and fishing. Agriculture is carried out, primarily by women, in small fields scattered around a homestead. At the time of our research, most Luo women worked from 3 to 5 fields, totaling 1.5 to 4.5 hectares, spread over a wide area (Pala 1983). Traditionally, land was corporately owned by patrilineages, and usufruct rights to exploit fields were obtained through male lineage membership. In other words, a woman gained access to land through her husband (who was a member of the local lineage, which she was not). However, it was usually the senior mother-in-law who actually assigned specific fields to the new brides of her sons (Herbich 1987). Corporate ownership of land gradually has been transformed (at least legally) by government schemes to ›rationalize‹ land holdings in a system of private ownership that the post-colonial Kenyan state took over from an earlier colonial strategy. However, given that land was registered as the private property of men, women still obtain access to land through their husbands in the traditional pattern.

Primary agricultural production to feed her family is considered the duty of every rural Luo wife, and, at the time of our research, there was relatively little dependence on purchased food (aside from small-scale ›target‹ selling and buying of foodstuffs at the local markets and the purchase of a few imported items such as tea, sugar, and salt). Alcohol, however, is something that is increasingly available for purchase, and this offers a novel economic avenue for women. The primary grain crops include sorghum, maize, and millet; and cassava and sweet potatoes are major root crops. The early Luo settlers who moved into Kenya beginning in the 16th century had a pastoralist orientation, and cattle have remained very important as a symbol and unit of wealth. They have long been the central component of bridewealth exchanges (now augmented with cash). They are generally eaten only in the context of feasting rituals, but their milk forms an important part of the ordinary diet. Sheep, goats, and chickens are a less valuable and somewhat more commonly consumed source of meat. Fish of several types are also a much-appreciated dish.

Although they now live with an administrative system of local ›chiefs‹ imposed by the British colonial government and continued by the post-colonial Kenyan state, the Luo have traditionally had a strongly egalitarian political ethos and lacked centralized authority. They do, however, have an indigenous term, *ruoth*, that is used to refer to modern chiefs. In the pre-colonial era this term more likely meant something closer to ›leader‹ or ›man of influence‹ than to the institutionalized political role it has come to signify. However, oral histories indicate that the degree to which individuals in the past were able to transform their informal influence within councils of elders into naturalized positions of authority and power varied somewhat from region to region. Traditionally, there was no pan-Luo centralized political authority or formal political hierarchy. Rather, the Luo are considered to be a classic example of a segmentary lineage system with fluctuating ad hoc alliances among lineages structured by genealogical distance between the disputants (Evans-Pritchard 1949; Southall 1952). The modern administrative boundaries within Luo territory, which were defined during the colonial era, effectively froze into static form what had previously been a series of highly dynamic factional and territorial struggles between competing subgroups.

As in many other African societies (e.g., see Akyeampong 1996; Colson & Scudder 1988; Huetz de Lemps 2001; Karp 1980; Netting 1964), drinking has been a central part of social life and a cultural leitmotif among the Luo: it has a number of crucial roles in the performance of ritual and in the construction of social and economic relations. This cultural and social importance stems ultimately from two features. Firstly, as noted earlier,

alcohol is actually a form of food: in fact, in the Luo case, it is a modified liquid version of *kuon*, the central symbolic and substantive element of Luo cuisine. Like other foods, alcohol is a product drawn ultimately from the earth through the labor of subsistence production and transformed into consumable form through human technology. Also like other foods, drink is intimately linked to the social relations engendered through the act of commensality and derives social value from the universally powerful symbolism of hospitality. Secondly, however, drink is *food with a difference*: it is a psychoactive agent that produces altered states of consciousness and induces changes in behavior. This mysterious transformative power of alcohol tends to promote an active role for it in ritual and ceremonial practices, to imbue it with special symbolic importance, and to insure that its use is closely governed by cultural rules and expectations.

Let us begin this discussion with a description of the basic *material* dimensions of alcohol in Luo society.

Types of Alcohol and Ingredients

Beer (called *kong'o*) is the traditional, and pervasive, Luo form of alcohol. It comes in several different types that will be described below. Beer has been augmented in recent years by the production, through an adopted technique, of a distilled spirit called *chang'aa*. Older Luo men noted that they had seen *chang'aa* in the urban context of Kisumu as early as 1915 where it was made by ›Nubians‹ – hence, its alternative designation, ›Nubian gin‹. However, it appears that it spread to the countryside only in the 1930s. By the time of our study, it was common throughout Luoland, although, because it was illegal, its production tended to be secret. Bottled lager beer (produced in centralized Kenyan breweries) has been available in urban bars throughout Kenya for several decades, but at the time of our study this was far too expensive to be consumed by most rural inhabitants of Luoland. Its consumption was generally restricted to a small cadre of local government officials and other salaried workers who frequented bars in government outposts and trading centers. Imported distilled spirits (gin and whiskey) were even more rare, something consumed essentially by urban elites in the larger cities of Kenya.

All the traditional beer (and *chang'aa*) is made from fermented grain, but several types of beer are produced from different kinds of grain: finger millet (*kal*), sorghum (*bel*), and maize (*oduma*). These are the same cereals used to make *kuon*, the stiff porridge that is the central pivotal component of the Luo meal and the defining symbolic image of food. Finger millet, a preferred ingredient for *kong'o*, is also used to make a popular non-alcoholic gruel called *nyuka*. Slightly different processes are involved in brewing the different types of beer, and there are also important differences in the practice and paraphernalia of consumption. It should be noted that in all cases there is a gender-biased pattern of labor in household drink production: women are responsible both for growing the crops and for brewing the beer.

The Utensils of Production and Consumption

Alcohol, as a liquid form of material culture, requires the use of containers for its production and consumption. Among the Luo, the most important of these are ceramic. However, basketry and other organic implements also serve important roles. There are significant regional differences in the forms and names of the objects, particularly in the case of pottery. The major classes of objects and their functions are described below, although more detail is provided in the following section.

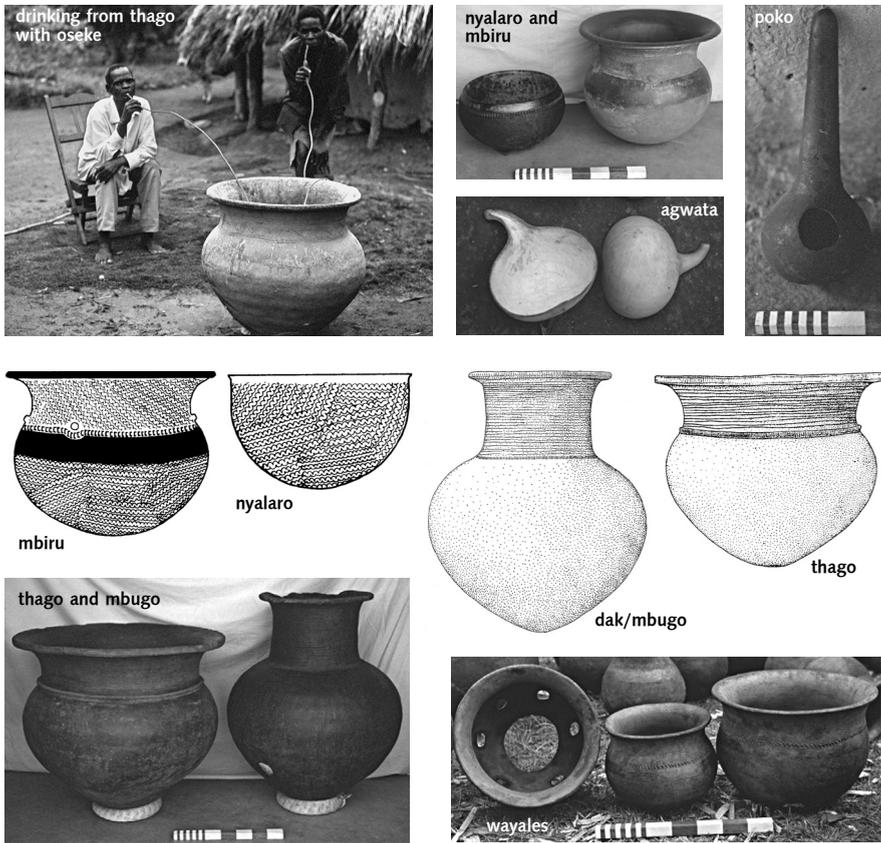


Fig. 1: Luo vessels used for alcohol production and consumption.

Pots include vessels for the various stages of brewing and for consumption (Fig. 1). As with other cultural practices (ranging from language to rituals), there is significant local variation among the Luo subgroups in the forms, decorations, and nomenclature of vessels that serve these common functions (see Herbich & Dietler 1991). Brewing is generally done in regional variants of a tall, wide-bodied vessel with a tall, restricted neck. In the Siaya region, this pot is generally called *dak* or *dakong'o*. In the South Nyanza area this may be called *nyakemba* or *ranyopi*. Other large cooking-pot forms are sometimes substituted for these. The initial souring treatment of flour (see below) is usually done in a drinking vessel, of which there are several variants. In most of the Siaya region, two types of drinking vessel are used conjointly for different purposes. The larger of these is a huge open vessel with a flaring rim, called *thago*. These can be over a meter tall and a meter wide. They are used only for important ceremonies with a large group of drinkers. When this occurs the *thago* is carried from the house to the drinking place (*siwandha*) and buried to about half its height in the ground. It is then used for communal drinking of unfiltered beer through long reed straws (*oseke*). A smaller vessel, called *mbiru*, is used for drinking filtered beer with cups, or small amounts of unfiltered beer with the long straws. The *mbiru* also has a wide, open form and a flaring rim, and it is usually decorated with bands of highly burnished ochre paint. When used, it is placed on a woven ring called *thach*. In South Nyanza and some parts of Siaya District (especially towards the southeast), these two forms are

replaced by two sizes of a vessel of simple hemispherical bowl form called *nyaloro* or *olaro*. These are never decorated with ochre paint, but each potter community has its own scheme of (usually minimal) decorative elaboration. Accompanying the *thago* at the location of consumption is a companion pot called *mbugo*, which is similar in form to *dak*. This pot holds additional beer that is periodically added to the *thago* along with hot water. In South Nyanza the equivalent pot is called *nyambiru*, *sime*, or *rabugi* and its form is variable (but always a large pot with a somewhat restricted neck).

Production of *chang'aa* requires the addition of a highly specialized pot called *wayales* (with one large hole in the bottom and several smaller ones around it) and a small bowl (*tawo* or *atelele*) that fits inside it. This is often used in combination with an aluminum cooking-pan (*sufuria*). The function of this set is described below.

Organic paraphernalia include the straws (*oseke*) noted above. These are made of a hollow climbing reed called *hamina mina* and they are outfitted on the end that goes into the pot with a woven palm leaf or papyrus skin filter (*odheso*). These straws can be nearly two meters in length and are carried in a bamboo quiver. Possession of such a straw is the exclusive right of senior men, and one can detect the immanence of a beer feast by the sight of an old man on the path with his quiver slung over his shoulder. Filtered beer is passed through a conical woven grass strainer, called *dhing*, that is about 30 cm in length. The traditional cup for drinking filtered beer is a gourd that is split in half and hollowed out (*agwata*), although this function is now often replaced by re-used metal cans or enamel mugs. Another hollow gourd (called *poko* or *lwendo*) is used for carrying hot water to the *thago*. This is a large whole gourd with a small hole on the side near the bottom. As noted above, a woven ring (called *thach*) of about 25 cm in diameter and made of the skin of papyrus reeds is used to support the smaller drinking vessels (*mbiru* and *nyaloro*) when they are placed on the ground.

The ›Chaînes Opératoires‹ of Beer Production and Consumption

Beer brewing (*nyuowo kong'o* or *nyopo kong'o*) involves slightly different sequences of technical acts, depending upon the type of beer desired (Fig. 2). In all cases, women perform these tasks in and around their houses.

1. The initial step involves grinding grain into flour (called *mogo*). This is usually done by a woman on a grindstone (*pong'*) located on the exterior of her house, although maize is sometimes brought to a mill.
2. This flour is then mixed with water and allowed to soak for several days (from 2 to 6, depending on the grain type) in open pots placed inside the house until it sours. The soured porridge resulting from this process is called *sinoho*. This initial fermentation, fed by airborne yeasts, produces lactic acid, which is essential later in converting sugar to alcohol.
3. For most types of beer, the *sinoho* is then roasted in small batches (in a ceramic pot or large potsherd, or half of a metal oil drum placed over the fire; Fig. 3). This process (called *chielo*) requires constant stirring and turning for a period of about 30 minutes per batch until it has the texture of small, friable lumps. The resulting substance (called *mbare*) is stored overnight in a basket and then spread out and dried in the sun for about two days, after which it can be used immediately or stored in baskets for periods of up to a year in readiness for the brewing process.
- 3a. For *sinoho* made from maize and destined for a kind of beer called *otia*, and for *sinoho* made from sorghum, the roasting is omitted and the beer is simply sun-dried and stored in pots (this substance is called *sinoho motuo*).

Chaînes Opératoires of Luo Beer Brewing (nyuowo kong'o)

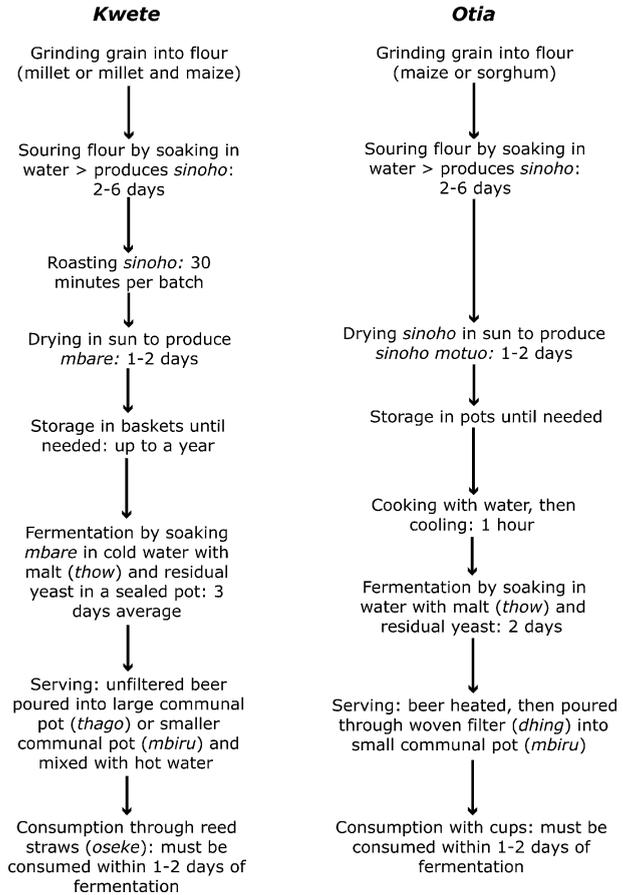


Fig. 2:
Chaînes Opératoires
of Luo beer production.



Fig. 3:
Luo women undertaking
chielo: roasting *sino*ho
to produce *mbare*.

4. When beer is needed for drinking, the dried *mbare* must be soaked in cold water for several days ahead of time. This is done in a large pot (*dakong'o*), with water being added periodically as it is absorbed. This process hydrolyzes the starches in preparation for conversion to sugar. A malt (called *thow*) is also added with the second batch of water. This malt is made from sorghum or millet that has been soaked and allowed to germinate (if the beer is made from millet, then sorghum must be used for the malt). The malt rootlets produce diastase enzymes that convert the starches in the *mbare* to sugar. Yeasts then feed off the sugar and produce alcohol if the process takes place in acidic and anaerobic conditions. The initial souring of the *sinoho* provided the necessary acid, and the fermenting pots are covered with cowhide during the fermentation process to maintain a carbon dioxide barrier on the surface of the liquid. This phase of mashing and fermentation (called *nyuowo* or *nyopo*) lasts for about three days, after which the beer is ready for serving.
- 4a. In the case of *otia* maize beer, the sun-dried soured flour (*sinoho motuo*) is first stirred into boiling water and cooked, then allowed to cool, after which it is soaked in water with malt for two days to produce the fermentation. In all cases, once ready for drinking, these beers must be consumed quickly, as they will go sour and spoil within a day or two (*ndwa* is the word for spoiled beer).
5. The intended mode of consumption will determine the method of serving. Some beer, called *kwete*, is served unfiltered, and mixed with hot water. This is consumed through long vine-stem straws (*oseke*) dipped into a large communal ceramic drinking pot (*thago*, *mbiru*, or *nyalalo*, depending on the size of the group and the area) that is placed in the center of a group of drinkers. Hot water is prepared in a pot over the hearth and carried to the drinking pot in a gourd vessel called *poko* or *lwendo*. This water and additional beer (from a *mbugo* kept next to the drinking pot) are added periodically to adjust the strength and temperature of the beer.
- 5a. Other beer (*otia*) is first filtered through a woven filter (*dhing*) and served in a communal ceramic pot (*mbiru* or *nyalalo*, depending on the area) from which individual portions are drawn with gourd cups (*agwata*), used tin cans, or enamel mugs. Several days before visitors are expected, a small quantity of beer often will be brewed to test the quality of the *mbare*. This is called *bilokong'owelo* (»tasting beer for visitors«). If the beer is judged to be not good enough, a new batch of *sinoho* must be prepared. Beer that is bitter (*kech*), but not sour (*wach* or *ndwa*), is judged to be good (*mit* or *beyo*).
6. Cleaning of pots after brewing and consumption depends upon several factors. Pots in which beer is served are washed out with water before and after serving. Pots in which brewing takes place (*dak* or *dakong'o*) are not washed if the beer was judged to be good: the pot is simply left in the sun to dry. The residues left inside speed up the fermentation of the next batch brewed in the pot. However, if the beer was sour (*ndwa*), then the pot must be cleansed thoroughly with leaves of a herb called *adupa*. The next time such a cleansed pot is used for brewing, the brewer must allow extra time for the process, as the fermentation will be much slower than in a pot with *kong'o* residues. A brewing pot should never be stored upside down, as mold may develop on the inside that will spoil the beer.

The production of *chang'aa* begins with the production of beer in the standard way. However, during the fermentation phase, brown »jaggary« sugar is added to increase the alcohol content, the mouth of the pot is tightly sealed (by placing a bowl over it that is sealed in place with mud mixed with cow dung), and the mixture is left to ferment for six or seven days. The fermented liquid (called *muna*) is then transferred in batches to smaller pots for distillation. These pots are outfitted on top with another set of pots that includes the *wayales* described earlier and a small bowl (*tawo* or *atelele*) fitted inside. This is sealed

on top with an aluminum pot (*sufuria*) filled with cold water. A fire is lit under the large pot and vapor passes through the holes in *wayales*, condenses on the bottom of the *sufuria* and collects in the *tawo* under it. This distillation process produces a drink that can attain 60–70 % alcohol (see Silberschmidt 1991, 63). *Chang'aa* production is usually performed outside the homestead in a hidden spot, as the process is illegal and can result in arrest. However, everyone knows where to find *chang'aa* when needed.

Drinking Events and their Meaning

These differences in the types of beer, drinking gear, and modes of consumption are all important because they symbolically mark distinctions both in the relationships and identity (social status and categories) of those engaged in drinking and in the nature of drinking events. Drinking plays a central part in major formal ritual events, in minor ceremonies, and in informal social gatherings. For example, the exchange and drinking of beer is an essential element of various parts of the wedding ceremony, the funeral ceremony, affinal visiting ceremonies, the ritual of founding a new homestead, the birth of twins ritual, and the harvest ceremony. It is also used in a less formal way for mobilizing work parties for house building and agricultural work, for sponsoring neighborhood parties (called *uhuma*), and for small-scale private hospitality (called *bilo kong'o*, or »tasting beer«).

The nature of the event is marked in several ways. For the most important of the ritual events, such as the affinal visiting ceremony (*omo oche*), unfiltered *kwete* beer will be served in *thago* and drunk with straws. The *thago* is used only in a special part of the homestead called *siwandha*, an outdoor shaded area surrounded by a brush fence. For other less important ceremonies and informal gatherings, *mbiru* will be used, either in the house or outside in front of the house. The method of drinking from *mbiru* (straws or cups) will be determined by the status and social category of the drinkers. *Mbiru* is never used in the *siwandha*, and *thago* is never used in the house. *Otia*, the maize beer, will only be used in *mbiru* and only for minor events.²

Every household owns a *mbiru* (or several). However, because of their expense, *theg-ni* (plural of *thago*) are much less common. Usually only one or two homesteads in a neighborhood will own a *thago*, and other homesteads must borrow it when they need it. *Thago* is also unusual in that it is one of only two forms of pot (along with its accompanying *mbugo*) that is individually named (that is, called after a specific person or event), the only pot for which there is a ceremony to initiate it, and the only pot with supernatural sanctions regarding its breakage.

Social categories and status are also very clearly marked and embodied by drinking practices, as Figure 4, a mural from an abandoned modern beer hall, nicely symbolizes. The most obvious of these distinctions is gender-based. Although, as noted previously, women raise all the crops for beer production and provide all the brewing labor, the act of consumption serves to emphasize their subservient status. Women are never allowed to drink from *oseke* straws. Moreover, when a wife accompanies her husband to a beer drink, she is expected to carry his chair for him while she herself sits on the ground. If she is allowed any beer from a *thago*, it will be given to her in a cup by her husband. Otherwise, she will be relegated to drinking from *mbiru* outside the *siwandha*. Age is also a basis of sta-

2 Because of space limitations, we have described rituals as they occur in the territory of Alego. Significant variations occur elsewhere. In South Nyanza, for example, there is no such space as *siwandha*. Beer drinking takes place in *laru*, the cleared area in front of the house, and the names of rituals are often different.

tus differentiation: younger, unmarried men are also barred from *siwandha* and relegated to drinking cups of beer from *mbiru*. This means that at a major ceremony, elder men will drink with straws from a *thago* in the *siwandha*, while other groups of drinkers of lesser status will cluster around several *mbirni* in other parts of the homestead. At lesser events, elder men will use straws to drink from *mbiru*, while others use cups.

In addition to such status and category distinctions, various aspects of drinking practice also serve to symbolically reiterate social relations and structural connections. For example, as noted earlier, *thago* is refilled with beer from its accompanying *mbugo* and with hot water. Each of these tasks must be performed by different individuals who stand in a very precise genealogical relationship to the host: that is a classificatory brother from another lineage segment, and a classificatory grandson from another lineage segment, respectively. Moreover, when the beer is first opened after brewing, it must be ceremonially tasted by yet another classificatory brother from another lineage segment. When a *thago* is initiated for the first time, the father of the owner must be the first to dip his straw in the pot and drink. These and many other practices underline the principle of genealogical seniority as well as the sharing of the larger patrilineage in the presentation of beer. This emphasis on the lineage is complemented by beer-giving practices in the marriage and in-law visiting ceremonies, which highlight reciprocal relations between groups of affines. Likewise, the fact that the first wife of the head of each homestead must first brew beer with new crops for the *huachra*, or harvest ceremony, before any other wives can begin brewing serves to emphasize her structural position of relative authority in the female domain within the homestead (see Dietler & Herbich 1993).

Aside from these institutionalized performative roles of structured symbolic representation, the flow of drink has an equally important role in the more manipulative domain of politics. While, within the structured categories noted above, all men may hold identical social positions in the formal political ideology, relative prestige and informal social power are very much matters of continual negotiation. The flow of drink is one of the important arenas in which this kind of competition is played out and in which social capital is acquired and publicized. Wealthy men provide copious amounts of beer at ceremonies for which they are hosts and for less formal hospitality. This beer is, of course, actually produced by the labor of numerous wives. As one informant put it: »In a homestead where there are many wives, the drinking of beer lasts for three days, while where there are only a few women, the beer lasts for only a day.« In order to obtain many wives, a man must own many cattle, which are the traditional Luo measure of wealth and the substance of bridewealth. Thus, a lavish feast with much beer is a public statement of wealth, prestige, and a long and successful cycle of investment. Because it is couched within the idiom of generous hospitality, it is also a socially approved form of such display that, at the same time, creates relations of reciprocal obligation. Moreover, as Whisson (1961) pointed out, beer and feasts served an essential role in pre-colonial forms of leadership. Wealthy men were able to provide copious supplies of beer and food for the lineage leaders who assembled to discuss political and judicial matters. Hence, wealth (in cattle, wives, and crops) was used to entertain »the leaders of the clans and subclans forming the nucleus of a council or court and meeting in the home of the richest or most respected man. This man became *ruoth*, the leader« (Whisson 1961, 7).

Beer is also a ready tool in the economic sphere. It is essential for mobilizing communal labor in the form of work feasts used for house-building, house repair, work in the fields, and other such tasks (see Dietler & Herbich 2001). Moreover, with the introduction of a monetary economy, alcohol has given women a certain degree of economic independence through access to something formerly beyond their reach: a durable and convertible form of wealth (that is, cash). This occurred through a diversion of this product of exclusively female labor destined for male status competition into contexts beyond the traditional range



Fig. 4: Woman drying *mbare* before mural of drinking scene in abandoned beer hall.

of female household obligations. The distinction between beer as a socially integrated good and beer (and *chang'aa*) as a commodity has been maintained by sanctions concerning the proper vessels used in its consumption. Beer offered for sale is not drunk in either *thago* or *mbiru*, but is consumed in metal cans (as is *chang'aa*). *Chang'aa* serves as a common supplement to beer, but it cannot replace it. Before the government banned them, specialized beer club structures were even developed for consuming commoditized beer. However, as you can see in a mural from one of these abandoned clubs (Fig. 4), even in this more profane context of consumption, the symbolic importance of the flow of drink was visually evoked in scenes of traditional, integrated, household consumption patterns.

Conclusion

This hasty sketch of the flow of beer in Luo society has been necessarily brief and simplified, but it is hoped that it serves at least to convey some impression of the important social and cultural roles drinking plays in a small-scale society and the material dimensions of drinking practices. How then, does this aid archaeologists? Decidedly not through direct analogy from one society to another, which is always a dangerous practice. Rather, it should serve as empirical evidence for the construction of a broader comparative theoretical understanding of drinking practices that can serve archaeological interpretation by evaluating both similarity and difference.

What this kind of approach suggests is that, in the first place, many traditional forms of alcohol (especially grain-based forms) have two important related characteristics. They are multi-step, labor-intensive products, and they are highly perishable (that is, they cannot be stored for long and must be consumed immediately). This has clear implications for the labor requirements for sponsoring large drinking events (including the gendered structure of this labor), and it places clear restrictions on the ability to store or accumulate

alcohol, and to transport it for trade. This means that the social value of these forms of drink resides in immediate and complete consumption in the context of a social event. In terms of the material paraphernalia of drinking, it is clear that even in egalitarian societies one can expect differences in service vessels that serve to mark the status of both events and people. Moreover, it seems quite probable that the most ceremonially important of these will be under-represented quantitatively in the sherd counts of the archaeological record, both because they are used less frequently and because they are more carefully treated (for example, in Luo houses one finds *thago* in use that are 50 to 70 years old, while small cooking pots are broken and replaced every few years). It also means that, when found complete on settlements, such vessels are more likely to be found in use for secondary functions, such as storage of grain, than in their less frequently occurring public consumption role.

Many other such observations can be drawn, but perhaps the most important point to be made is the characteristic way drinking serves to link subsistence production to the political economy through a unique form of conversion. While grain is so low on the scale of value that no amount of it can be exchanged directly for cattle or used for bridewealth, its conversion into alcohol makes it a powerful tool in the arena of status competition and display, in the mobilization of labor, and in the construction of social relations. Hence, it must be understood by archaeologists that drinking is not a social epiphenomenon to which ›surplus‹ production may be dedicated when circumstances allow a psychological desire for drink to be satisfied. Rather, it is a crucial social practice and a central element of the political economy to which it is common, cross-culturally, to find 15–25 percent of household grain supplies regularly devoted (and sometimes as much as 50 percent: Dietler 2001). In both its structured symbolic importance and its capacity for political and economic manipulation, the flow of alcohol in a society offers an important window on social relations and practices that, with proper attention to its material dimensions, can be very profitably exploited by archaeologists in their study of ancient societies.

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