Manhood, Warriorhood and Sex in Eastern Africa

Perspectives from the 19th and 20th Centuries

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The term "tradition" as used here has two related meanings. In its narrower sense it refers to warrior practices and values handed down from generation to generation in any particular society. In this sense it is descriptive and, to a large extent, realistic. It concerns itself with how a particular society can be expected to recruit and train its warriors, how the warriors can be expected to behave, especially in wars; and how they might be organised and armed. In other words we are here concerned mainly with military tradition.

More broadly, however, the term refers to the consequences and significance of military values and practices for society as a whole. The main concern here is with relationships and meanings. For example, how does war and warriorhood relate to and affect the economic, political, social, aesthetic, and psychological life of a society? What is the significance of the war dance or a war song? What is the link between manliness or masculinity and warrior values? Do these values have any implication for the status of women in the societies concerned? The problem becomes even more challenging when we try to explain contemporary African behaviour by reference to indigenous norms. For example, how much of the behaviour of modern soldiers and liberation fighters in Africa today is affected by traditional concepts of the warrior? Were the "Mau Mau" revolt in Kenya in the 1950's, the Maji Maji War in Tanzania at the turn of the century, or the Pare protest against colonial authority in the 1940's in the same country a resurgence of the warrior tradition? How has modernisation in the technology of war affected indigenous warrior values?

It is quite clear that such questions do not lead themselves to easy matter-of-fact answers. We have to probe, analyse, and often guess at answers. The task is a challenging one given the state of historical studies of war, warriorhood and the warrior especially in tradition Africa, to date. Only recently, the historian Bathwell Ogot (1972: 1) called this a "little-studied aspect of African history." More recently still, an eminent scholar with a particular interest in the military in Africa has complained that "Comparative study of military organisation in Africa remains surprisingly limited in scope. With
the exception of the Yoruba and the Zulu, and of the societies set forth in books edited by Crowder and Ogot, the impact and modalities of conflict have rarely been subjected to systematic, comparative analysis cutting across several groups” (Welch, 1973: 3). These difficulties should be born in mind by the reader of this paper.

But whether we are dealing with tradition in the first or the second sense, a decidedly sociological approach and interdisciplinary method of analysis is suggested, particularly for Africa. By a sociological approach we mean studying the warrior and war in terms of the dynamics of society as a whole paying particular attention to the social, political and economic processes and institutions vital for the particular society concerned. This is in contrast to an approach which would concentrate on the warriors as constituting an army, a distinct institution within society, to be studied in terms of military technology organization, strategy and logistics.

A few societies in pre-colonial and colonial Africa did evolve interesting military organisation, strategy and tactics. G. C. K. Gwassa (1972) has suggested that during the Maji Maji war, for example, three-pronged attacks were prevalent among the indigenous warriors and that these could be explained in “traditional” terms. “It may well be that among these people,” he writes, “three is a ritual number: that is, in order for payer of ritual to be effective, the doer must repeat each act three times. Thus the number three, or anything representing it, becomes a symbol of success for the doer and for others of his faith...” (p. 141).

Though explainable, at least partially, in religious terms, the strategy made a great deal of military sense, as the Germans found out to their cost. Gwassa gives us this interesting illustrative example:

One morning at Samanga Ndumbo, Maji Maji fighters came in and uprooted cotton. Of hearing of this action, Kinoo or Steinhagen, together with the akida and some askaris, marched to and attacked the Africans. After a short fight the Africans retreated into the interior. Later in the afternoon they came back and took up three positions—the Kinjumbi road, Kilwa road and Mohoro road litapo posi. As the Germans were expecting an attack from Kinjumbi, this litapo charged first and Steinhagen hit back very ruthlessly. But that litapo retreated, pursued by most of the Germans; simultaneously the Mohoro road litapo moved into the attack. A remnant of askaris and supporters had to fight the Mohoro litapo which in turn retreated and was hotly pursued by the Germans. This left Samanga Ndumbo undefended, so the Kilwa litapo moved in and burnt the settlement down... (Ibid.: 141).

The same interesting pattern is seen in the guerilla methods of warfare used in areas where they were suitable during the same war. With the highly sophisticated kalinguli method, after the enemy had been located, an ambush was laid, arranged in a ‘V’ formation with the apex away from the enemy: “The Kalinguli or spy then went out, and when he was a reasonable distance from the enemy, he fired at them and ran back as quickly as possible towards the apex of the ‘V’. On seeing the Kalinguli the Germans nearly always pursued him mistaking him for a lone attacker. In this way the askaris gradually became engulfed in the ‘V’ formation, and as they reached the apex they were attacked