Editor’s Introduction

I first met Mzee Zedekia Oloo Siso back in 1991 when a missionary research doctor, Glenn Brubaker, introduced us as people with a common interest in the history of the region. Siso had been working with Brubaker traveling throughout the Mara Region of Tanzania collecting blood samples for their research. But in the course of that work and the contacts he had made he developed a passionate interest in preserving the history of the region. When we met Siso held up a large bag of cassette tapes on which he had recorded historical interviews with elders over the course of a number of years and asked me with a grin what he should do with them now! At that time I was ready to leave the Mara Region to begin my graduate study in African history. That encounter began our collaboration over the past 15 years, during which time Siso transcribed his tapes and wrote up his own synthesis of the historical material for posterity. Although Siso has no training as a professional historian his book makes an important contribution to the history of this region, not only as primary source material for future historians but also in its exploration of the critical issues of migration, assimilation, ethnogenesis and conflict, and perhaps most fundamentally, to preserve historical traditions for the people of this region.

This book is Siso’s compilation of oral histories about the movement of Luo and some Bantu-speaking peoples along Lake Victoria into North Mara, Tanzania in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It includes histories of the Surwa, Irienyi, Kiroba, Sweta, Hacha, Tegi, Rieri, Kakseru, Kagwa, Kamageta, Turi, Gire, and Kowak clan or ethnic groups. The various stories tell how they were forced out of western Kenya by the effects of drought, warfare, disease, competition over pastoral resources and the caravan trade to look for a land that they could call their own. Over that century of movement and interaction this area of North Mara went from being an East Nyanza Bantu-speaking population to primarily Luo-speaking. Communities in the area forged new identities and adopted Luo language and culture as they married Luo wives and made various alliances and kinship connections with the immigrants. Yet it was also important to maintain a connection to the land through their Bantu-speaking ancestors. Prophets with powerful medicines and warriors introducing a new kind of warfare with spears and shields assured that the immigrants would be welcomed as powerful allies.
These factors led to deep interactions and the establishment of networks between communities rather than separation and exclusivity predicated on blood relations. Oral traditions still preserve these historical connections between diverse communities as critical social capital.¹

The identities of the various ethnic and clan groups discussed in this book emerged during this time of movement and have changed drastically over the past century. The colonial government, assuming a paradigm of unchanging “tribes,” characterized the peoples of North Mara as either Kuria (Bantu-speaking peoples living in the eastern highlands, like the Kiroba), “pure” Luo (more recent immigrants from Kenya, like the Kowak, Turi, Kamageta, Kagwa, Kamot), Girango (Bantu-speaking peoples who had adopted many aspects of Luo language and culture, like the Gire, Tegi, Rieri, Kakseru) or Suba (peoples who did not speak Luo and practiced circumcision, like the Irienyi/Simbiti, Surwa, Hacha and Sweta). The Germans built the first fort at Shirati to check the movement of “Luo” coming across the border from Kenya. British officers and anthropologists collected ethnographic material to figure out the origins and affiliations of North Mara peoples.² They divided the administrative districts according to this categorization and appointed paramount chiefs who ruled over fictive federations of people based on language and custom at that moment in time. Yet these categories continue to elude easy categorization, attesting to their diverse origins. This book rarely mentions those categories but rather puts smaller clan groups into dynamic interaction with one another in historical process. Siso’s collection does not categorize peoples as Luo or not but rather provides separate narratives for each of the sub-groups, giving primacy to these smaller scale identities.

People who have kinship connections to the ethnic groups represented here will delight in the specificity of the references to places, people, kin groups and events in the book. The elders passed on these stories to Siso precisely because they have relevance to living communities and the issues that impact them today. Those in western Kenya will be able to trace some of their genealogies to North Mara and visa versa. Producing

the text in both Swahili and English ensures that local people will have access to these histories for their own learning and on-going discussions about the past. The stories themselves are also highly entertaining with tales of fooling the colonial officers, winning battles by heroic sacrifice and producing miracles with the prophet’s medicines. The primary audience for which Siso wrote was his own friends and relatives in North Mara and western Kenya, particularly the youth. He said, “This book will be an inheritance for the next generation, it is what I want to leave behind as my legacy.” As one of the elders put it, “without history you are like wild animals…. you need to know where you came from and who you are.”

Historians and anthropologists will find in this book rich primary source information for their own research. Although the oral sources have been passed through Siso’s interpretive framework they retain the quality and much of the content of the original sources. While Kenyan scholars, beginning with B.A. Ogot, have preserved much of Luo oral tradition in western Kenya little work exists across the border in Tanzania. Those interested in cultural change will find this a fascinating case of Luo assimilation and ethnogenesis within a few generations. The material is deep and rich enough to call into questions the stereotypical analysis of a Luo “invasion” of Bantu communities that was common in the colonial reports. Although warriors and chiefs play a critical part in the story so too do unlikely actors such as women, prophets, spiritual forces and common farmers. Since the events chronicled in this book took place in the recent past the processes are still underway and observable in communities today. The stories cross over from pre-colonial to colonial to post-colonial eras in a way that also challenges historical assumptions about periodization based on national or global events.

At another level this book is also an interesting study in writing of popular history and the application of historical tradition to current agenda. In spite of Siso’s commitment to portray both the good and the bad, a certain sense of nostalgia about an idealized past pervades the book. The past is mobilized to help the elders to regain some control over the youth who have gone away and no longer provide support or

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to regain pride and confidence in the face of increasing poverty and neglect by the state. Siso assumes the historical tangibility of ethnic groups that only took form in the course of these late nineteenth century narratives. The colonial administration was responsible for appointing chiefs to these clan groupings, which then assumed the form of a “tribe.” By dividing the chapters into ethnic group histories Siso gives these colonial divisions traditional validity. He chooses to emphasize ethnic or clan identity in a nation whose policy it has been to promote nationalism over division. The ethnic chapters also mask considerable internal dispute over versions of the past that benefit one faction over the other. While I was in Buturi various factions brought their versions for late consideration. Some of this dissent has been incorporated in the text. Yet he also refuses to subsume these micro-ethnicities into larger antagonistic ethnic identities such as Luo or Bantu-Kuria. Siso’s account is still close to the oral version, in part because he used a tape recorder rather than his own memory to write the chapters and often took the material verbatim from the transcript. He does not add introductions or conclusions to the oral narratives and therefore does not frame the stories in any obvious meta-narrative. This collection will be a valuable addition to the literature on ethnohistory and its historians. Siso’s historical work stands as a monument to the creativity and perseverance of amateur historians amongst us everywhere.

In early 2008, during the time that this book was in its final stages of compilation and editing Kenya erupted in post-election conflict, sparking ethnic animosities between Luo and Kikuyu. This book about Luo/Bantu interactions over the past hundred years then takes on additional significance in light of recent attempts to understand the underlying causes of this conflict. Some may think that publishing a book about conflict, migration and warfare over land in the past would only serve to exacerbate the current violence. Yet other patterns are discernable to those who read the oral histories carefully, which defy easy assumptions about “tribal hatred.” This is not to say that conflict between ethnic groups has not been an ongoing problem in the Mara Region. In fact the stereotypical view of North Mara throughout Tanzania is one of cattle raiding, poaching, domestic abuse and armed conflict. Yet these histories allow both local people and outside observers access to culturally grounded material on which to base their analysis.

They further suggest that language and ethnicity do not necessarily determine the lines of conflict. Siso countered that the peace Tanzania has enjoyed will be broken rather by inequality of wealth and lack of food rather than cultural difference. He attempts to show in this book that peace is built on following the good disciplines of the past and learning from their elders.

**Biography of the Author**

Siso was born in 1934 and raised in Buturi, Tanzania, speaking Kijaluo. Yet his connections to other peoples and places throughout his life made him familiar with many beyond those boundaries and gave him the vision for collecting histories beyond his ethnic group. Siso’s parents had strong family and work connections across the border in Kenya (Kisumu), his father going back and forth for work most of his life while the family stayed in Buturi. Against his parent’s wishes Siso ran away to go to school, mostly because he liked the trappings that came along with it, like parades, sports, hats and singing. After passing the Roman Catholic “Bush School” he became a leader at Tarime Primary School, in a Kuria-speaking area. Because very few Luo boys had been given the chance for education there was considerable ethnic tension at the school and Siso sustained lifelong injuries when he challenged the school’s bully.

Siso continued to expand his connections with others through his long and varied schooling and career path. He worked in Mwanza and Dar es Salaam as a day laborer, shop worker and learned the trade of carpentry and furniture building, later running his own furniture shop in Tarime. Siso did some of his Secondary School in Uganda but also studied medicine in Tanga, leading to a position in Community Development in Tarime, and various training courses in Arusha and elsewhere after independence. His education in Community Development and Health Care was often cut short by his own continuing health problems going back to the primary school fight with the bully. In the course of these experiences he met people throughout the nation and became aware of his own origins.

In 1967 Siso was asked to come work at Shirati Hospital with the Leprosy and Burkets Lymphoma field research, which included taking saliva and blood samples throughout the region. As a result Siso was often suspected of being a vampire (mumiani) and had to spend a lot of time explaining to people what the samples would be used for and building community relations by treating basic illnesses or bringing critically ill people into Shirati Hospital. Siso became well known as he
traveled in the rural areas throughout North Mara and was a friend to many. He had a house in Shirati and often kept people, fed them and paid their bills when they came to the hospital.

Siso credits much of his success and happiness to his late wife Anastasia whom he met in Tabora in tenth grade and married in 1968. She was a nurse with a varied career of her own and had studied in Holland. This marriage came after Siso's two earlier arranged marriages as a child had broken up. Anastasia took the children from those marriages and raised them along with her own four children. The couple stayed together until her death in 2002. Siso speaks fondly of his wife saying, “She is the foundation of this household and took me from my poverty, a person who was be laughed at in the village, and made me who I am today.” He attributes this transformation to her ability to keep a tight reign on the accounts so that the children would be able to get an education.

Siso was known in Shirati as Bwana Huruma or “Mr. Compassion” because he was always helping people out. He once found out after the fact that he had unknowingly helped the wife of a man who had seriously wronged him and as a result was later asked for forgiveness by that man. From this Siso learned to help everyone, even if they do you wrong, or you don't know who they are. He particularly delighted in helping those rejected by society. Siso enjoyed sport hunting for big game and often brought the meat back for the leprosy patients at Shirati Hospital along with his colleagues. Siso and his wife paid the school fees for at least 37 children throughout their lives, some all the way through university level. These students included both his own family and children of his friends. Siso says that many people are amazed that he didn't keep company with the rich and famous, rather his friends have always been the poor and elderly. Even his own children say that he will spend all their inheritance helping others.

Ever since Siso served as a community development agent he has worked to improve the lives of people in his community. The promotion of tree planting has been a particular obsession of his and each place that he has gone orchards and forests have been left behind. His house in Buturi today is surrounded by luxuriant forest growth and he single-handedly managed to have a pond dug near to his house where the whole village now gets water year around. Through Siso's work with leprosy patients he found a way to help them become self-sufficient by purchasing a grinding mill that they could operate through the Leprosy Program. Before this time the leprosy patients had trouble getting anyone to grind their grain out of prejudice against them. Later on he
was able to get the leprosy patients in Buturi a grinding mill as well. They have used those profits to build their own houses, plant trees and forge an independent life. Siso has also been instrumental in building a Secondary School in Buturi and promoting education for girls by finding funds for building a girl’s dormitory at the school in 2006.

In 2004 Siso was in a serious bus accident and nearly lost his life. He continues to suffer ongoing consequences from his injuries but keeps on with his various activities in Buturi. He credits his ability to survive an accident like this to an encounter with a poor old man from Bugire many years ago. Often when Siso would see this man in the course of his work he would stop and give him some food. One day the man came up to Siso and asked him to open his hands. Then he spit on them as a blessing and said, “You will have long life but will not get more wealth than my spit.” Siso said, “This spit has taken me a long way. He promised me long life and happiness for my kindness to others, which would be worth more than wealth.” Unfortunately, while Siso was in Bugando Hospital for many months things were taken out of his house, including many of his research materials. He is still worried that when he dies no one will know the value of his collection.

In his retirement years Siso has become known as a valuable consultant on health issues because of his life long involvement with Shirati Hospital and the Medical Research program. While I was staying with him in the summer of 2007 there was a constant stream of people at all times of the day or night, particularly parents with sick babies, at his door seeking advice. He gives out simple over-the-counter medicines and lots of advice about hydration and sanitation. People believe that he will make their children well. He also runs a small hardware shop in town and is generally called on when people need advice or to settle a dispute in the village. He was called on last year to bring his gun and kill a hippo that was tearing up the gardens near the river. Siso does not have any formal titles in the village nor is he a politician or an especially wealthy man; he just does what he can to help.

Although Siso was one of the first in the village to have a tin roof and owned various cars and motorcycles in his lifetime, he considers himself to have had “wealth of the heart,” not of money. He said that his father once chided him for not making more wealth. He had the gift of being able to make friends and talk to people easily. Siso is now the eldest male in his family and so shoulders that responsibility, including dividing out the family land to those in need, chairing family meetings and settling disputes. His house is a museum, with stuffed animals from his big
game hunting expeditions, spears, shields, agricultural implements and
ornaments no longer in use and photographs of family and some of
the elders that he interviewed. He hopes that before he dies he can see
this book published. The new tarmac road from Musoma to the Kenya
border now bypasses Buturi. Siso too is out of the communication loop
that used to sustain his life and living alone. But when you come back
toward the village you can still ask anyone the way to Siso’s house and
they will take you there!

Siso as Historian
Siso claims that he got his start as a historian when he was a child
sleeping at his grandmother’s house (Maya Alila and Ouma Siso).
She told stories at night, both animal and historical tales, that taught
children the proper way to behave and who they were. When they were
older the boys gathered around the fire with their elders, while the girls
stayed with the women in the kitchen to hear more stories. But it was
their grandmother who would patiently answer questions, comfort the
children when they were hurt or afraid, and teach them how to stay
out of trouble. Grandmother learned the historical stories when she
carried her husband’s stool and straw to go to the beer gatherings of
the elders where stories of the past were shared in the context of solving
current problems. Grandmothers had an important voice in the family,
which is disappearing today as children often live far away from their
grandmothers’ house.5

Siso further became aware of the power of history when he was in
school and read a book by an East African author on the abolition
of slavery. The book had such a powerful effect that Siso decided he
wanted to write a history book that would show both the good and the
bad. But unlike the book he had read he wanted to write local history,
about his own place and people. He was inspired by the Biblical account
of finding the Promised Land and the battles that they fought to claim
it. He even started writing notes for a history in 1949 when the colonial
government consolidated the chiefdoms, but lost it in 1959. It was only
in 1978 that he seriously began to pursue research for the book again.

Perhaps Siso’s most important inspiration was his sense of the
growing gap between parents and their children in Tanzania today. He
noted that as Tanzanians have gotten more education they begin to
imitate the ways of the white people, taking Christian names, accepting

5 See David William Cohen, “Doing social history from Pim’s doorway,” in The African
Past Speaks (Folkestone, Kent: Dawson Archon 1980).
modern individualistic ways and leaving behind their own families and traditions. Young people go to live in the city and do not come home to build their homes anymore. This started back in colonial times but the new generation does not take care of their families or follow the traditions as before. Siso hopes that a book like this will inspire the youth to learn about their past and change their ways. He would like to see the youth take their elders as a valuable resource, a heritage and a school for learning the most important things in life. Nurturing this love between the generations is Siso’s way of promoting an older sense of morality and respect for elders.

Although popular historians in East Africa have written many local histories, Siso is somewhat unique in that he collected histories beyond his own Buturi people and even beyond Luo-speaking people in North Mara. Siso credits this to his extensive contacts throughout the region and his observation that local historical knowledge was disappearing everywhere. He noted that even Buturi history depends on the larger context and can not stand alone. Certainly the most extensive history included in this collection is the Turi, with the most informants and the most complex approach. Yet it is significant the Siso even tried to go beyond what was most immediate in his own community. He wanted to write a history that would show the deep relationships between people in this region. He hoped that all peoples would see themselves in this history, both the good and the bad, so that all might learn.

Siso also hoped that this history might contribute to peaceful relationships between the various peoples of North Mara. Although much of this history is one of conflict Siso is convinced that this knowledge will not bring renewed conflict. People are settled on the land now, times have changed and there is no good to be gained from further conflict. The conflicts ended not because the colonial government stopped it but rather because people formed deep relationships across ethnic lines through marriage, making it impossible to fight their in-laws. Wives left their homes to join their husbands’ families and introduced their own languages and customs. The local Bantu-speaking people, in particular, desired Luo wives. Young men formed friendships and alliances across the Luo/Bantu language divide, enabling them to assist each other in warfare, gain access to prophecy and medicines, and meet potential wives. This history of multiple and overlapping interactions and relationships encourages connection and commonality rather than enmity.
Siso began talking to the elders and collecting their stories when he worked as a community development officer and in medical field research as early as 1979. But in 1989 he got a tape recorder from the malaria office and took the project to a whole new level. He started to go to funerals where the elders sat around for days together to talk about history. He would ask them questions and get the group talking about the past. Often they would begin to complain about how the world was changing and the youth no longer cared about their elders. As he talked to elders they suggested names of others who should be interviewed. At that time he had a motorcycle and a car and was able to move around the region to do the interviews. Although some elders were at first reluctant to be recorded they want to see this history in print so that their grandchildren could enjoy it. People still ask Siso wherever he goes if that book will ever be printed.

As an amateur historian Siso soon ran across the problem of reconciling conflicting accounts. He tried to talk to many different people, often ten or more, in order to decide which version was true. Some people only wanted to give the positive and heroic accounts but Siso was determined to write down even the difficult parts. Siso wanted to write one narrative for each ethnic group but soon found out that the various versions of the past were often irreconcilable in one narrative. So we tried to incorporate some of this into the text as well as the footnotes. In Buturi my presence with Siso to edit the book sparked a Gimono clan meeting to make sure that their claims were given space in the book. Since this project stretched out over more than two decades it is hard to Siso to even remember how many people he interviewed. He still has over two hundred cassette tapes in his house. He kept a notebook listing his interviews but that was lost, along with some tapes and photographs, when he was in an accident and in the hospital for months without anyone to keep his house secure. The tapes themselves are not well labeled and have deteriorated over the years. Siso is in process to get these tapes preserved for future research. Many of the tapes are in Kijaluo or other local languages.

Once Siso got the interviews on tape he did not know how to advance the project further. I met him in 1991 and encouraged him to begin the process of transcription. So between him listening to the tapes and writing out what he heard and a secretary typing this into a word processor we eventually got something near to a transcription in Swahili. Siso then worked with that material to create chapters for each of the clan or ethnic groups in North Mara. When I was a graduate
student at the University of Florida Peter Wanyande translated much of the original material into English. Once the chapters were finished I cut, pasted and edited the translated material. The final editing in both Kiswahili and English was done through the kind help of Mkuki na Nyota Publishers. It was difficult to get consistency and accuracy with names and places and so we apologize in advance for those mistakes.

Siso's accounts in the final text are quite close to the original oral form. His judgment in what to cut and what to include are of course critical in the final product, but the text preserves much of the interviews almost verbatim. The problem for a professional historian is that one is never sure where one is hearing the voice of the elders or of Siso's interpretation. We have tried to indicate which material in the chapters can be attributed to which informants but in the end this proved to be impossible. Siso and the elders were not nearly as concerned about the individual author and saw this as a communal effort. For the purposes of the book attributions had to be reconstructed from Siso's memory and from the cassette tapes that might have a name but no date or place. Where we have some indication of the origin of the material it is indicated in the footnotes. Otherwise we have tried to list all the informants at the end of each chapter. Without doubt some people who contributed have been left out as a result of poor memory or lost records and for this we apologize in advance.

The book is divided into chapters based on the clan or ethnic group divisions, although there is considerable overlap in the material. The book is published in both Swahili and English so that a broader range of local people can have access to the texts, as well as to maintain the original language in which Siso did his work. The words that remain in Kijaluo or other local languages are italicized and translated. The original tapes should soon be available at the University of Dar es Salaam, East Africana Library for those who want to go back to the interviews, often in Kijaluo. Maps, photos and charts supplement the material to make it more understandable to those outside the area. Siso wrote the introduction to the book in 1997 and the conclusion in 2007. In the summer of 2007, thanks to a generous Faculty Scholarship grant from Fulbright-Hays, after the manuscript had lain dormant for over ten years I spent a number of weeks with Siso in Buturi where we read through the manuscript to make corrections and did ten interviews so that I could get a sense of the oral material behind the writing. We also worked at organizing the cassette tapes and photos that could still be found. We are grateful that Walter Bgoya of Mkuki na Nyota Publishers
in Dar es Salaam picked up the project and brought it to this final version. Siso notes in the conclusion to this book that he hopes to inspire others to begin historical investigation and discussion in the region rather than seeing this as the final word. As my own mentor Steven Feierman noted in a recent publication, “Local history is, in this political sense, neither progressive nor regressive. It simply is a rich heritage, and none of us can know all the uses to which it will ultimately be put.” This book is a result of Siso’s unique life of connections to so many diverse people, his commitment to promoting understanding and his legacy to the coming generations. We hope that Siso’s collection of that rich history, will be put to productive use and enable that heritage to remain for future generations.

As Siso and I finished our work in Buturi we were inspired by a voice from the past blessing our endeavors. One of our last interviews was in Kowak where we returned to one of Siso’s original informants, Ojode Saramba (aka “Africa no Good”) and eventually got to speak to his elderly mother Ariya. As Ariya spoke to us about her childhood in Bugire, her marriage in Kowak and her connections to the ancient prophetess Auma, who brought the Kowak to possession of their current land, she seemed to be moving back into the past again, reliving those moments. Her voice was low and quiet, with Siso translating from Luo into Swahili for me, as she explained the ways in which she had inherited the gift of prophecy from Auma. All of a sudden in the course of the interview her head snapped to attention, her spine straightened and she began speaking in a loud and commanding voice. We looked around to see which transgressor was the object of her directives in an older form of Luo. It soon became apparent that we were now hearing the voice of Auma, speaking to us through Ariya’s possession trance. Siso stopped translating, the video camera lost its battery charge and we all sat transfixed to the end of Auma’s speech, when Ariya collapsed and seemed confused about what had happened. The speech, later translated from the audio by Siso, gave words of warning to the people as well as ordering them to tell the whole truth about the past and give these words to the guests for their good work. Her son Ojode later told us that ten days earlier Ariya called him to say, “some guests are coming

under the God's shadow (kivuli cha Mungu) and they will bring good things to the land, not witchcraft.” It is with this hope that we offer this collection of stories.