

# IN ALTRE LINGUE

## An Okiek Folktale

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### Introduction

Okiek<sup>1</sup> is a Nilo-Saharan, Eastern Sudanic, Nilotic, Southern, Kalenjin language, very close to Nandi either lexically or morphologically. Okiek (79.000 people in Kenya according to the 2009 census and an ethnic population of 20.000) are hunters and gatherers and they have always been considered *Ndorobo*, that is “servants”<sup>2</sup> of neighboring, pastoralist, tribes (Nandi, Kipsigis and Maasai). Far from being farmers themselves, Okiek have always been in touch with farmers, bartering with them the products of the forest (honey and game meat) in order to obtain principally milk and iron in exchange.

Even though in many fields the cultural influence of their Nandi, Kipsigis or Maasai neighbors is noticeable, oral tradition seem to have preserved in Okiek characteristics which are its own.

Corinne A. KRATZ in the late ‘80s, beginning of the ‘90s, has explored some interesting fields in Okiek verbal art such as blessings, curses and oaths (KRATZ 1989) as well as songs performed during the girls’ initiation rites (KRATZ 1990). Furthermore, she has analyzed in detail the public dynamics of *pesenweek*, the public confessions of social debts performed mostly by Okiek girls in the night before initiation ritual cutting, (KRATZ 1991). Through her articles, KRATZ has underlined very well how the use of language and narratives can affect and, many times enact, social actions, power recognition and changes of status, as it is the case in initiation performances which accompany the person in her/his passage from childhood to adulthood. An elder’s blessing, curse or oath, spoken out in an official occasion is considered as having much more performative power than a youth’s one. Blessings, curses, oaths, initiation songs and *pesenweek* must be confined to special occasions and performed following a specific and detailed schedule in order to be effective. Each actor has his or her own role in any speech act and only when all traditional rules are respected can the speech act be effectively functional.

Okiek seem to be very proud of their oral tradition and, from the sociolinguistic survey I conducted in Mariashoni in January-February 2013, emerged that 95,7% of the people interviewed considered oral tradition as something very important in children’s education and even though most Okiek in Mariashoni declared to know also Kipsigis tales (45 out of 142 interviewees admitted to tell tales in that language), only

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<sup>1</sup> Alternate names are Ogiek, Akie, Akiek, Kinare, “Ndorobo” pej. Ref.: [www.ethnologue.com/language/oki](http://www.ethnologue.com/language/oki)

<sup>2</sup> *Ndorobo* should be a kiswahili loan from Maasai *II Torobo*, literally “short”, a word the Maasai used to describe the forest people, who were actually very much shorter than their Nilotic counterpart.

7 people declared to know also kiswahili tales, while 77 declared to know and tell only Okiek traditional tales<sup>3</sup>.

Despite KRATZ's brilliant works on what the author herself calls "genres of power", the scholars' knowledge of Okiek folktales is still very poor. Nonetheless what comes



out from a preliminary study is that Okiek tales are in a way very different from those commonly found in the most widely known Eastern or Western African traditions (Bantu or Akan)<sup>4</sup>. If the key values transmitted as the moral of the tales are in fact basically the same (respect for the elders and for nature, observance of traditional law, an ethical and sympathetic behavior and the like), in the Okiek narrative, the actors displaying these eternal truths are not animals, as it happens usually in the rest of black Africa, but human and supernatural beings. Further research has to be done in order to give a complete description of the issue.

For the moment this tale is just an example of the Okiek rich traditional heritage. It was recorded in Mariashoni on February, 8th 2013, with grandma Tapletikoy Kibilo Salimo<sup>5</sup>, whom I wish here to thank sincerely.

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<sup>3</sup> MICHELI, Ilaria (*in print*), figure 13.

<sup>4</sup> See for example on this MANDELA, Nelson (2004) and MICHELI, Ilaria (2007).

<sup>5</sup> For the audio file see at [www.ethnorema.it/pdf/numero%209/OgiekFolktale\\_TapletikoyKibiloSalimo.mp3](http://www.ethnorema.it/pdf/numero%209/OgiekFolktale_TapletikoyKibiloSalimo.mp3)

## Okiek version

Kó:gò ay Tjémosisié<sup>gh</sup>

(<sup>1</sup>)Kì:enén<sup>6</sup> kò:gímànᵛ mí kà:risié<sup>vh</sup>. Kì:gibéndi je ké:ujè<sup>7</sup> kógiᵛ nár póisiᵛn<sup>8</sup>  
 (<sup>2</sup>)ké:βàgadž ké:lòldži má:t, ísèβunᵛzi ómdìtwog<sup>9</sup>, kó:mègi<sup>10</sup>. (<sup>3</sup>)K(w)ó:mì ískò:zúe  
 maígàn<sup>11</sup>, ískò:zúe maígàn, (<sup>4</sup>)kò:rùn<sup>12</sup> ne mé má:ti, ké:gò:rùn ké:mù ísèlòldži má:t áyè jil,  
 (<sup>5</sup>)ké:rìan ísèiβunᵛzi ómdìt áyè, ké:βàs en ɪzúgan, ké:βàs en ɪzúgan, (<sup>6</sup>)ískiriᵛmei,  
 ískiriᵛmei, ó tùn ké:lè, ké:βùà (kò:) mó áyè tíldè ɪzè βáɔz, (<sup>7</sup>)ké:tìl ítít. Kò: kò:rùn, ké:lè  
 ké:βùà kógèᵛ ne émeᵛn<sup>13</sup>, (<sup>8</sup>)kò:lé áyè tíl kéldò, “*aja! kò: ne nìgá:min kó:gò*<sup>14</sup>?”.  
 (<sup>9</sup>)Kò:lé: “*tjémosisié<sup>gh</sup>! zhiho!*” kò:lé kó:gò (<sup>10</sup>)“*Ké:làl má:t neòg<sup>h</sup> si mó nù tjémosít  
 nòn!*”. (<sup>11</sup>)Kì:lál, ké:ndè súbèni<sup>gh</sup>, ké:βùt kwé:nì<sup>vh</sup>, kì:lál, (<sup>12</sup>)kì:ndè tji mwòn pápè<sup>vh</sup>,  
 sélèndži “*ís(i)àm ai kó:gò! kò:máᵛnù kò:tár!*”. (<sup>13</sup>)En ós kò:lé kò:nú tjémosít nìgá kò:tó:m  
 kò:tára pápè<sup>vh</sup> tjugan... (<sup>14</sup>)kò:gán kò:ám pápè<sup>vh</sup> tjugan, kò:βó índasatét<sup>16</sup>, kò:géti  
 kò:tíldè kéldò áyè, (<sup>15</sup>)émeᵛn kò:lé ay kò:pég kó:gòn. Kó:rùn ké:lè ké:mù kò: mí  
 kò:twégu. (<sup>16</sup>)“*Óiβun<sup>17</sup> tšégò kó:gò, óiβun tšégò kó:gò*”; (<sup>17</sup>)“*íβùn<sup>18</sup> tšégò kó:gò, íβùn  
 tšégò kó:gò*”. (<sup>18</sup>)Ké:lè ké:βùà ràì<sup>19</sup> méyòmùtšè kò:twég... (<sup>19</sup>)“*émeᵛn kà:záme  
 kó:gòn?*”. (<sup>20</sup>)“*Ké:lègè ké:rìamda à:yò:íβ ímùrmurtet, tà:kòsiéniz kí:tjò...*” (<sup>21</sup>)ba:s<sup>20</sup>!  
 kò:rùnì kì:lál mà:t, ké:pàz, kò:mé kò:mùtšèi kò:ám pápè<sup>vh</sup>... (<sup>22</sup>)Ké:gònòr, ɔs ké:lè  
 ké:βùà. Kó:rùnì, émeᵛn, áyè ám ràì kò:tógùl<sup>21</sup>, (<sup>23</sup>)mégò:twégu kó:yò. Ké:βà ké:mùaita  
 ló:gògh émeᵛn (<sup>24</sup>)kò:gópèk kó:gòn, kò:gòàm Tjémosisié<sup>gh</sup>... “*zhi!*”, ló:gù<sup>gh</sup> tju kò:lé,  
 (<sup>25</sup>)“*óó, màtáyè<sup>22</sup> tšégò... kó:rùn ké:lè ké:βùn!*”... (<sup>26</sup>)kò:lé ló:gù<sup>gh</sup> alay “*kì:βá ké:rìome  
 kó:gò!*” (<sup>27</sup>)Ké:βùà: “*óiβun tšégò kó:gò, óiβun tšégò kó:gò*”. (<sup>28</sup>)Kò:lé tjémosít nìgò ne:

<sup>6</sup> Verb forms prefixed by morpheme *kì:-* indicate a very far past. The form, like all the Okiek verbal morphology analyzed so far, sounds similar to what CREIDER Chet A. and Jane T. CREIDER (1989: 78) define as “*past 3*” in Nandi.

<sup>7</sup> Ver forms prefixed by morpheme *ké:-* are characteristic of the infinitive, or of non-past 1st person plural. See also CREIDER Chet A. and Jane T. CREIDER (1989: 77) on Nandi.

<sup>8</sup> *Póisiᵛn<sup>h</sup>* is a honorific term.

<sup>9</sup> Food, as a non countable noun, represents an exception in Okiek, having a singular (*ómdìt*) besides a plural form (*ómdìtwog<sup>gh</sup>*), while usually non countable nouns have only the plural form.

<sup>10</sup> The common form for honey is *kó:mè<sup>gh</sup>* (only plural). The final -i here is just an alternative phonetic realization.

<sup>11</sup> *Maígàn* is the determinate form for *má:t* “fire”, and is therefore translatable with *the fire / that specific fire* also in the extensive meaning of *compound*.

<sup>12</sup> *Kò:rùn* is a time adverb, which could be translated as *tomorrow*, but which has also the meaning of *the following days, the period to come*.

<sup>13</sup> Lit.: “*In our country*”. The word (which does not have a plural) has also the meaning of “community”, “family” or even “clan”.

<sup>14</sup> The word can be used as a generic for *old lady* or as an appellative form for *grandmother*.

<sup>15</sup> *Tjémosisié<sup>gh</sup>* (sg. *tjémosít*) are supernatural beings, sometimes translated as *giants*, which are thought to live in the forest and to be very dangerous for people.

<sup>16</sup> *Índasatét* (pl. *índasatut<sup>gh</sup>*) is another word for *grandmother*, which is considered a more ancient form than the commonest *kó:gò*.

<sup>17</sup> The infinitive of the verb to bring is *ké:íβ*. The form *óiβun* is 1st pers. singular subject prefix + V + O. The form of the Okiek 1st person singular subject prefix differs from the Nandi one which has a “a” instead of a “ó”. Cf CREIDER Chet A. and Jane T. CREIDER (1989: 84).

<sup>18</sup> *íβùn* is the 2nd pers. singular prefix pronoun + V + O. In this case the subject prefix is the same as the Nandi one. Cf CREIDER Chet A. and Jane T. CREIDER (1989: 84).

<sup>19</sup> *Ra(i)* in Okiek is a time adverb meaning *today*, but here it is used to indicate the specificity of a particular day and can be translated with *that day*.

<sup>20</sup> The word has no meaning, it is just an interjection.

<sup>21</sup> Compound word: *kó:(gò)* “grandma” + *tógùl* (all).

<sup>22</sup> Introductory morpheme *mà-* in the verb is characteristic of the negative form. Compare with CREIDER Chet A. and Jane T. CREIDER (1989: 106) on Nandi.

“*íβùɔn íféǵò kó:gò, íβùɔn íféǵò kó:gò!*”. <sup>(29)</sup>Émeɓ̀n kò:lé: “*nìgís kò:tét<sup>23</sup> ra, ay kò:íg tǵnd<sup>24</sup> ní*”... ba:s... <sup>(30)</sup>Ké:m̀ìɩɩ ló:gù<sup>gh</sup> íúan, mà:tàké:it kó:hígan kó:r̀un, ké:βà... <sup>(31)</sup>kò:pég òt̀indjɔnɔn<sup>25</sup> kò:zúnɔn.

## English translation

### The old lady and the Tjemosisié<sup>gh</sup>

<sup>(1)</sup>Long time ago there were no cars. They used to walk when they migrated, also very old people who couldn't move. <sup>(2)</sup>(These old people) lived (where) they had made the fire<sup>26</sup> and were brought food (and) honey. <sup>(3)</sup>(In those days an old woman) ate, keeping herself close to the fire, keeping herself close to the fire. <sup>(4)</sup>Each day, when there was no fire (left), each next day, someone (of her family) came very early to light another fire<sup>27</sup>, <sup>(5)</sup>they came to visit (her), they brought other food, they fed (the old woman) in that place, they fed (her) in that place. <sup>(6)</sup>(One day) they came to visit her, (the next day) they came to visit her, but (the following day), when they decided to come (again), they did not (find her ok), because someone had cut a piece out of her. <sup>(7)</sup>Someone (had) cut (her) a ear. The next day, when they decided to come again to that place, <sup>(8)</sup>they found that someone had cut another (piece), the leg: “*Ahi! What has eaten you, grandma?*”. <sup>(9)</sup>She said: “*The tjemosit! ohio!*”, said the grandma. <sup>(10)</sup>“*We light a big fire, so that that Tjemosit doesn't come (again)!*”. <sup>(11)</sup>They lighted the fire, put big pieces (of wood), cut the firewood, and lit the fire. <sup>(12)</sup>They put down the meat for her, and told her: “*Eat, grandma! It<sup>28</sup> may not come and finish (you)*”. <sup>(13)</sup>When the Tjemosit decided to come, she had not finished to eat that meat... <sup>(14)</sup>It started to eat the meat which was for the grandma, (then) it repeated (what it had done the days before): it cut another leg. <sup>(15)</sup>Our people said that someone had finished that grandma... The following day we decided to go very early (to see what had happened), (but) there was nobody speaking... <sup>(16)</sup>“*I bring the milk, grandma, I bring the milk grandma!*”; <sup>(17)</sup>“*Bring me the milk, grandson, bring me the milk, grandson!*”. <sup>(18)</sup>When we decided to come that day, she was not able to talk... <sup>(19)</sup>“*People, what has happened to that grandma?*”. <sup>(20)</sup>“*When we decided to spy (through the window), (we saw that) she had become pieces, she was only still breathing...*” <sup>(21)</sup>“*ah!*” The following day we lighted the fire, we fed her, she was not able to eat the meat... <sup>(22)</sup>We stored (the meat there), thus we decided to come the following day. People, again they had eaten the whole grandma, <sup>(23)</sup>the grandmother could not speak. The children went back to inform the community: <sup>(24)</sup>someone had finished that grandma, the Tjemosit had eaten her... “*ohi!*” said those children, <sup>(25)</sup>“*Ok, don't bring other milk... tomorrow*

<sup>23</sup>*Nìgís kò:tét* lit. *heavy mouth* (heavy voice).

<sup>24</sup> The association between supernatural beings and savage animals is common in many African tradition. In Kulango for example it is not rare that people use alternatively the words *zina* and *gyina* (< Ar. jinn) to refer to the spirits of green places. See for example the texts collected in MICHELI Ilaria (2011).

<sup>25</sup> *Ót̀indjɔnɔn* (*ót̀indjɔn + ɔn* - determinative particle) is a kiswahili loan, in other occasions the same teller used the original Okiek word, which is *Tóhùtj*

<sup>26</sup> This expression: “where they had made the fire” indicates the more stable compound, Okiek used to build for longer stays.

<sup>27</sup> lit.: *early they lighted fire another repeated*.

<sup>28</sup> The pronoun refers to the *Tjemosit*. It could be interpreted either as a neutre or as a masculine / feminine pronoun. The choice of neutre is mine.

we will go (there)”... <sup>(26)</sup>the other children said: “we were the first to go<sup>29</sup>, we will visit the grandma!”. <sup>(27)</sup>(So) They went: “I bring the milk grandma, I bring the milk grandma!”. <sup>(28)</sup>That Tjemosit answered: “bring me the milk grandson, bring me the milk grandson!”. <sup>(29)</sup>Our people said: “today (she has) a heavy voice and she turned into an animal!”... ah... <sup>(30)</sup>Those children feared, the following day they didn’t reach that house, they went (away)...

<sup>(31)</sup>This tale is finished right here.

## References

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<sup>29</sup> Lit. we went.