

## **Cows of Dolo Ken Paye-Notes**

**Update**-Dr. Peter Weil, Department of Anthropology, University of Delaware (Personal Communication, 2000). As of 2000, many of the people you saw in this film are dead or survive as refugees in the neighboring country of Guinea after the bloody 3-sided civil war that wracked this West African 3rd World state. Many Liberians are also now living in New York in the United States because of their favorable historical connections with the USA. The Kpelle already existed as a chiefdom when the Liberian state was created in the 1890s. Like the colonial powers in their areas of domination, the Liberian state also created other "chiefdoms" out of existing tribes, simply as a ruling device.

**History**-Liberia (coming from "Liberty") was founded by repatriated slaves after they elected to be returned to Africa after emancipation in the U.S. That is why the capital is called "Monrovia", named as it is after President Monroe.

**Failed State**=Today it is a good candidate for a "failed state", that is, a nation state that has not proved viable due to, often, tribal animosities within it. The film tells you that the Kpelle, in the interior within Bong County, are only one of 12 such tribal & chiefly polities within Liberia. Currently, a West African peacekeeping force is occupying the remnants of this country.

**Chiefdom**-This film illustrates a chiefdom, a form of a dual-tiered polity (nobles=cattle-owning chiefs/commoners=poor rice farmers) intermediate between the tribe & a state. It is still dominated by kinship, but represents the first supra-village organization; a chief has power over more than 1 village.

**Stratified Redistribution**-The chiefs attain their power via "stratified redistribution", where they keep a "profit" after receiving contributions from their followers, & use that profit to pay for "enforcers" like the "messengers"=police you saw in the movie, dressed in uniform & armed with rifles.

**Corvée**-When the Chief needs to rebuild the wall around his compound (note the association of monumental architectural construction with chiefdoms), he invites (commands) his followers from the village he lives in & from other villages under his power, to come & build it. That is their "labor tax"=corvée to him. As you saw in the B&W photos of the previous chief, Dolo Kem Paye, he then slaughtered only a single cow from his herd, **keeping the rest to bolster his economic power**, to feed the laborers. Remember the small pile of "glop"=meat on top of the huge piles of "gorp"=African dry rice, the staple carbohydrate source.

He is obviously making the meat go as far as he can. Yet his followers are grateful for the little they receive since they rarely get to eat "cow

meat", as beef is called. Their daily diet is largely vegetarian: greens & rice, with only a little occasional goat meat or perhaps some "bush meat"=game.

**Power**-Therefore, the chiefs have real "power" (the ability to force their followers into compliance via law). They also retain "authority", the moral dimension, but unlike "Headmen" & "Big Men", the political leaders of band & tribal society, they supplement it with power derived from the profit inherent in their stratified redistribution practices.

**Religion & Authority**-The Chief's "authority" is exemplified by their use of religion, the belief in supernatural spirits with "will". Note that when the previous chief, Dolo Kem Paye, had the leg tendon of his largest bull cut by an irate young farmer, he said that he could put his "spirit"=soul into his cattle, perhaps the young men were really trying to kill him?", he asked ominously. Here you see how authority, respect for the spirits, was coupled with economic power=the herd, to bolster the chief's control.

**Levels of Control**-Note the complex character of a typical chiefdom: the Kpelle have 4 kinds of officials over them: (1.) **Quarter Elders**=The lowest tier, respected senior men, 2 from each quarter (the towns are divided into 4 quarters=8 Quarter Elders). The malefactor, the guilty party, Suela Qwella Jowl, the defendant, is, in fact, one of these well-liked and respected elders, (2.) **Town Chiefs**=The 1st tier of the chiefs, the rich, cattle-owning farmers, stratified above the Quarter Elders and ruling them. The aggrieved party, Karboy, the Town Chief, is the plaintiff. He rules over the Quarters & their Elders. Because of that, since he is the plaintiff, he must "recuse" himself & defer the "palaver", the tort (the case) to a higher authority, the (3.) **Clan Chief**. Since the Kpelle have **patrilineal unilineal descent groups**, like many others in West Africa, their lineages correspond to the people living patrilocally in the quarters (the Quarter Elders are, in fact, senior men within their own patrilineal lineages). The lineages, as we have seen, are part of larger descent groups called "clans", and clan residents will therefore be found in multiple quarters within a village and in neighboring villages inside a chiefdom. That is why a Clan Chief outranks a Town Chief, because his authority cuts across several quarters and villages. The Clan Chief is Samuel Paye, the son of former Paramount Chief Dolo Kem Paye. Lastly, (4.) the **Paramount Chief** (the "chief of chiefs"), who rules over several clan chiefs, is Ruala. He must be called in from a distant village, via the "chain of command" to oversee the tort along with the Clan Chief of the aggrieved village.

**Rank Society**=Chiefdoms have societies characterized by "ranks", not "classes". Ranks are differences in the status of people, but differences that are as much **achieved** or **attained** statuses (which one must earn via one's own actions in life) as they are **ascribed** statuses via one's birthright. That is why rank statuses are much more **volatile** than is class membership. That is, one rises and falls with equal alacrity in rank society. An example of this is Samuel Paye. Note that he did not become the new

Paramount Chief after the death of his father, Dolo Kem Paye. Instead, Ruala evidently proved more cunning and a better politician, and hence has risen to power, while Samuel has fallen to the lower level of Clan Chief. Note, however, that Samuel has not fallen to the level of a poor rice farmer commoner! One seldom falls below one's general rank, just by gradations within it. If the Kpelle had a **kingdom**, rather than a chiefdom, Samuel would have succeeded his father as Paramount Chief.

**Sumptuary Codes**=The reservation of "sumptuous" items for the exclusive use of high-status (high-ranked) people. Note that only the chiefs live in Western-style concrete-washed huts with aluminium roofs while the commoners dwell in simple wattle & daub (woven stick & mud) huts with thatched roofs. Only the chiefs dress in elegant Western-style suits, smoke imported pipes with imported (Half & Half) tobacco, & sit on chairs (stools were the traditional West African symbols of high status power) while their followers stand, and own Western imported items that are expensive, like transistor radios.

**Magic & Law**=This film also illustrates how magic, as well as religious notions (the chief's spirit invested in his cattle) plays a role in traditional law.

**Seer=Ordeal Operator**-Old Man David is an example of a seer, a magico-religious specialist that sees what others cannot, into the future & the past, things hidden & occult. A member of a distant tribe, the Kran, he is sent for by the Paramount chief to investigate the case. Note that to increase the psychological effect of his presence he has to be a stranger from an alien, and presumably more powerful, group. Why employ a local seer, whose weaknesses are known to all, when one can send for a distant, therefore mysterious, specialist?

**Ordeal**=A supernatural method of determining guilt or innocence. The outlawed Poison Ordeal involved defendants taking a poison, the guilty died, the innocent lived. This has now been outlawed, replaced by the Hot Knife Ordeal; the guilty are burned, the innocent are not.

**The Coexistence of Traditional Magico-Religious Notions with World Religions**=The Kpelle are nominal Lutherans, yet notice how traditional

spiritual ideas (fetishes, spirit investiture, magical rituals) are still believed in. This is called **syncretism**, the fusing of indigenous & acculturative notions.

**Fetish**=An object, usually small, with an in-dwelling spirit. Note that Old Man David says to the proxy that the ordeal will not catch him if he has a big fetish backing him. Famous West African fetishes are small statues carved out of wood in human or animal images, bristling with iron nails driven into them to represent requests, and usually a mirror mounted in the belly to symbolize occult vision.

**The Ordeal Operator is Liscensed**=Old Man David is actually a liscensed professional within the modern Liberian state! Note that he carries an umbrella, a modern version of the traditional African parasol as a symbol of rank, as does his interpreter, Matthew Kennedy. He also wears dark glasses, as does his interpreter, to provide further mystery (one cannot see his eyes, therefore one cannot guess what he is thinking, giving him power in such West African societies who believe the eyes are "windows into the soul"). He also wears the items of Western society, thereby cloaking himself in the alien power of the World System. For example, he wears a pith helmet, the accoutrement of the old colonial powers, knickers, archaic Western dress, and carries that symbol of modernity, the briefcase. Yet, instead of legal briefs inside, he carries ritual paraphrenalia!

**Magical Rituals**=Rituals are private acts directed primarily at supernaturals, altho a human audience may be present. They involve a stereotyped sequence of minute "parcelled-out" physical acts that automatically summon the magical powers (magic as a form of "supernatural technology à la Bronislaw Malinowski). Note the complex array of ingredients (the ointments, the feather-inner tube bracelet, the wooden pegs, etc.) arrayed around the fire, all to impress the audience with the seer's occult powers.

**The Manipulation of Magic**=Note how Old Man David, already knowing the identity of the malefactor, manipulated the magical ritual to yield the desired result. He applied thick protective ointments to his leg, only water to the proxy's; he stroked the side of his leg with the thin **edge of the blade**, with little surface area unlikely to burn him, while he applied the **flat of the blade**, with its large burning surface area, to the leg of the proxy, thereby ensuring that the latter would be burned.

**The Proxy=Corporate Guilt**-In such unilineal corporate descent groups as the Kpelle possess, remember that all members are essentially inter-changeable; they are not unique social persons, tho, of course, they are unique biological individuals. Therefore, when one member of a lineage or clan is guilty, so too

are all the other members of his patrilineal lineage. Therefore, a "proxy", one who stands for all, is used. He is a poor rice farmer who stands for all the farmers in the village; if he is burned, as he was, this means that the guilty party lives within his village.

**Belief is Essential**=Magic "works", as in this case, only if the people using it believe in it. Notice that Suella Qwella Jowl, the malefactor, would not have confessed to Old Man David, nor attempted to move the blame onto another, if he did not believe that he would be caught anyway. Even if the ordeal failed, people would have remembered the times in which it had succeeded.

**Public Humiliation**=Chiefly societies, unlike states, do not have full-time judges or jails. Therefore, the chiefs can only briefly detain Jowl. But they can apply the "sanction" of public humiliation. The Paramount Chief's Police haul Jowl up-and-down in front of the crowd to embarrass & humiliate him as a deterrent to others. We in the West, and in the Far East, used stocks for the same purposes, a wooden harness in which the malefactor's head and hands were encased, exposing him outside (in the New Castle public green, just to the east of us, for example) to public scrutiny & derision.

**Indemnity & Social Equilibrium**=The goal of traditional law, as here, is to return society to equilibrium, the status quo, what society was like before the incident, not "punishment" (as we emphasize). Therefore, the original boys paid an "indemnity", a fine" to recompense the former Paramount Chief for the loss of his bull, and Jowl, by his actions, forfeited the right to demand redress (an indemnity) for his lost rice.

**Characteristics of Law**=This film illustrates all the principles of law:

1.) Non-arbitrary enforcement=If one breaks the law, one must face the consequences, regardless of who one is (notice Karboy recused himself & went up the chain of command rather than just punishing someone ad-hoc).

2.) Precedent=How was the case handled the last time it happened? The past serves as a guide (the precedent), for the present case. Note how people remembered what happened the last time such an offence happened (the case of the former Paramount Chief's bull).

3.) Rules of Evidence=Physical, "empirical", reasoning from clues. Note how people recognized that the cut on the calf's tail was made by a hooked machete, a rare form of jungle knife, & asked which of the farmers in the area that the calf was found owns such a bush knife? Most Kpelle torts are settled by rules of evidence, just like our's, not magical ordeals.

4.) Cross-examination of witnesses=The boys who found the calf were asked where it was found?

5.) Third-party deliberation=Disinterested intermediaries, here higher-ranking Chiefs, decide the matter, not the aggrieved parties (that would be a feud).

**Court Legal System**=This film illustrates the simplest kind of court, where the judges come to the case, rather than the defendant & palintif coming to a permanent court, but they both operate in similar ways. Chiefdoms, as here, & states, have this kind of conflict resolution mechanism since it is based on both power & authority.