

The Luo Stool , Kom Nyaluo

By Jane Achieng

In many modern Luo houses, stools are set up as furniture pieces that are easy to move around.

The stool

The traditional stool known as "kom nyaluo" stood on three legs. It had a concave surface and elegantly curved legs. 'Kom Nyaluo' was small, with a height of about 30cm from the ground that fitted the overall general size of the small size of the people.



A stool has been defined as a seat with no back or arms for use by one person. Stools have been recorded in history as being in use in most societies. In today's contemporary era, in the house of a Luo, a stool has become a household furniture item for decoration and is mostly used as a small side table as part of the sitting room furniture. The modern stool is a three- or four-legged backless seat and is higher in height than the original stool used in the traditional societies.

Among the Luo, the story of the history of their stool goes back to the rural village. Here, it is a common observation that people like to sit outside their houses in the sun with neighbors or visitors, chatting and conversing as they carry out simple routine tasks such as sorting out beans and vegetables. For this, they carry out the stools to sit on while others sit on traditional mats and other light foldable chairs.

And so, in a sense, and over time, the stool has retained its lightweight for easy mobility.

Contextually, the original meaning and usage of the Luo stool has changed over time!.

Where did people sit!

In the traditional setting and Luo order of things, seating places were built into the walls of the houses where a raised structure was built against the outside wall of each house where people could sit around during the resting period from hard work. Literally, every house had this raised veranda. This veranda structure is in use till today for most of the rural dwellers. And so, it can be concluded that seats were scattered around the homestead. A Luo home was made up of many houses. There was the main house being the house of the first wife. Annexed to it were other houses of the various wives if a man had more than one wife as well as the boy's hut (Simba). Within all these settings, there were enough places for different people to sit either on the mat (par), orindi, small wooden seats, or a log that was cut out. There were also fold-able chairs that came out much later. It is noteworthy that they generally led a life that was mostly outdoors and used the indoors to sleep and receive visitors.

The stool was not a general furniture item for use but a seat made for an elder in the society and to some extent, it became a symbol of one's status in life that comes with age, maturity, and new responsibilities. In normal circumstances, a stool was passed down to the firstborn son in a handing-over ceremony together with all the other paraphernalia for such an occasion and it became a personal item not shareable. It became a symbol of a takeover of certain responsibilities of a home to a new person. However, this did not mean other men who were not firstborn could not have their stools. Indeed, when a man attained the age of being considered, each had a stool that they carried to meetings or drinking places to sit on.

Many contemporary writers have a tendency to present the Luo stool as an instrument of power, and a symbol of male virility and to cast the topic of the stool on sexual and gendered issues. It is important to note that Luos had strict boundaries on clothing and sharing of private spaces and items. This carries on till today. It is equally important to note that in that era, there were no clothes worn. The men wore pieces of loin clothing of animal skins. This is why the privacy and usage of the stool was guarded and controlled just like they guarded the usage of private spaces such as the bedroom, (*korka chiena*) and other items that were considered private to certain people.

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The Luo Stool - Kom nyaluo

As soon as a man becomes the head of a home, he enters a world of responsibilities, boundaries and endless possibilities. He takes on the responsibilities of caring for a homestead . He becomes the owner of a stool that serves him.



The stools were small in size and very light because the elders had to carry them everywhere they went.

The traditional three-legged Luo stool (kom nyaluo) symbolizes maturity, family responsibilities, and authority. Writing in 1934, Paulo Mboya in his book *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi*, gives an elaborate account of how the first born son inherited his father's stool after the death of his father.

If the father was in a leadership position in the community, a ceremony was conducted to handover the stool and other artefacts of leadership such as the whisk and the headdress.

Description

The Luo stool

It was anchored on three legs and was curved out of a tree trunk that was of strong but very light wood. This was because the elder had to carry it around with him wherever he went. The stool was curved out of the wood without any breakages or joints and presented as one unit.



Decorated Luo stools

Luo stools were generally plain with a smooth finish. The finishing came from the application of colorations and substances derived from special trees.

Decorated stools were made for the leadership of the community and they were distinguished by the decorations and symbols designed on them. Some had carvings and symbols entrenched into the wood while others had special beads sealed on the edges. As the Luos migrated and came into contact with other communities, and with the availability of nails and glue the design of the stool changed and the four legged stool came into place. It is then that the four legged stools became an ordinary furniture item in the house and not a dedicated furniture piece for an elder. It also became normal to buy decorated four legged stools as beautiful furniture items for the house.



Making the stool : kom nyaluo

The traditional *Kom Nyaluo*, stool, was small, with a height of about 30cm from the ground. The stool was anchored on three legs and had a round concave surface. and stood on 3 legs. Many were plain except for those made for leadership positions which had decorations made from beads and other artefacts set around the edges. Each man or elder had their stool, and women and children were forbidden from sharing in it's usage. *Kom Nyaluo* is associated with privacy, respect and authority accorded to a man or an elder in the home and the society.



Fig 1. The stool was curved out of the trunk in one piece



Fig 2. A traditional Luo stool after many years of usage.

The traditional stool was carved out of logs of wood from special trees which had qualities of strength, easy to shape and mould as well as being water resistant. Trees such as *ober* (mvule tree), *ngo'wo* (fig tree), *duwa* (oak tree) and others with similar qualities were favored in addition to those trees with unique colours and grain patterns. The stool was curved out of wood without any breakages or joints and presented as one unit.

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The traditional stool design was round as projected in the circular design preferred for many structures of Luos. Many of the material designs were took a circular look as seen in the design of their houses, the granaries, the pots, plates, food storage baskets, and pottery. Typically, the stool was also round.



Fig 3. A Luo traditional stool with decorations. Normally presented to an elder with leadership position in the community.

References

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