



## Swoger, the Ritual Spear of the Marakwet

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The Marakwet and Endo tribes, which both belong to the so-called Kalenjin-speaking group of tribes, live in Western Kenya at about 1° North Latitude. Their territories are adjoining and form together with the territory of the Elgeyo tribe the administrative Elgeyo-Marakwet District.

Among these two tribes an unusual ritual-spear called swoger<sup>1</sup> is found, of which the scanty literature on these tribes makes no mention. Its physical appearance, manufacture and function in tribal life make the swoger a unique item in the cultural inheritance of these tribes. Although the swoger and its use are still widely spread, they are bound to disappear in the next few decades as a result of the rapid changes occurring today.

Below I have tried to give a comprehensive account of the swoger, mainly based on personal information gathered in 1968 from people living in the area mentioned. This study was conducted as a result of a personal interest in the subject, and in direct connection with my not-yet-completed study of the Traditional Spears of Kenya. All inquiries among Marakwet and Endo were made in Swahili supplemented by some knowledge of Kalenjin vocabulary of words and terms relating to spears.

My thanks are due to my principal informant, Yohana arap Ng'alech of Makil, Sambirir, and many others of my Kalenjin friends, whose interest and patience during inquiries encouraged me to complete this study.

### The Swoger and other Spears

Among the Marakwet and Endo a number of conventional spears are found, known by the generic word chepauwes (kipauwes). The most common spear, especially among the Endo and the escarpment-dwelling Marakwet is the leaf-shaped, long-necked spear shown in fig. 1.

Its specific name is ng'ot. A variant of the ng'ot is the asieperet, which has a long blade and is on the whole heavier. This rather rare spear is shown in fig. 2. Further, the spear-type which is commonly associated with the Nandi and Maasai is known to the Marakwet but virtually only occurs amongst the Marakwet of Iron and Mosop. It is known as merieget or kapswareret. See fig. 3. All these spears are, or rather were, used for hunting, warfare and protection. They are all fitted with sockets which enclose the shaft. They are always well maintained i.e. kept sharp and free from rust. Moreover, the first two types mentioned are provided with leather sheaths which fit over the razor-sharp cutting-edge of the blade. For completeness' sake I also mention a rather rare spear known as almeroto, which is used by a remnant Dorobo group, who have to a large degree been assimilated by the Marakwet. They live in the forests of the Cherangany Hills. Their spear or harpoon has a sagittate, detachable poisoned head and weighted shaft. It is used for hunting big game only (fig. 4).

Though spears among most tribes of East Africa are purely utilitarian weapons, the swoger of the Marakwet and Endo has mainly a socio-ritual function in tribal life (fig. 5). It is not looked upon as a spear and is never called so. A swoger may never be used for any offensive or defensive purposes nor may one even pretend so to use one. Although the shape of its blade may vary (fig. 6), there are a number of features which characterize the swoger and differentiate it from ordinary spears. The most important are:

- (1) it is a short spear with short blade and butt, but relatively long shaft;
- (2) there is an almost complete lack of a midrib on the blade (where there is a sort of midrib it is completely different from any midrib seen in present-day ordinary spears, fig. 7 a and b);
- (3) the blade (and often also the butt) fits into the shaft by means of a tang;
- (4) the shape of the blade, though varying, is different from that of ordinary spears.

The swoger most probably originated from an ordinary spear. This would appear to be so because of its likeness and especially because of its careful manufacture, worthy of a proper spear. However, the blade is never sharpened; its point is rounded and the edges are blunt; nor is it ever polished. All this goes to emphasize its use for exclusively non-violent purposes. Consequently, it is not provided with a leather sheath (malian), thus providing another feature to differentiate it from other spears.

Once the swoger has been accepted and in use in the kuret (section of a Location), it is not maintained, i.e. it is neither cleaned nor greased. However, minor repairs, such as replacing the piece of skin around the top of the shaft, or refixing the blade or butt, may be made. As the swoger is usually kept in the rafters of a smoky hut, its colour is usually a deep, dark-brown to pitch-black, and the blade is caked with rust and soot.

This however does not impair its value; on the contrary, it is preferred this way.

#### How the Swoger is made

Although there must be a number of very old swogerisiek throughout the district, nobody seems to be concerned with the age of a swoger. It is for this reason that even these days a smith may be asked to make a blade and butt for a swoger, because a new swoger is as good as an old one.

The main parts of the swoger are: the blade (melei), the shaft (rumet) and the butt (kasipet or chilei) (see plate). It is noteworthy that all these terms apply to both the swoger and to ordinary spears. The descriptive words ne bo swoger may follow any of these words, to differentiate between parts of an ordinary spear and parts of a swoger. The blade and butt are made by a blacksmith, who used to be paid either a lump of iron equal to the quantity required for the manufacture of blade and butt, or a two-year-old goat. Nowadays he is prepared to make blade and butt for a few shillings.

The parts are then assembled by boring holes into both ends of a wooden shaft and inserting the butt with glue first, after which the blade is glued in the other hole. Pieces of unslit cow's tail-skin are then forced over both joints where they are left to dry and shrink so as to fit the joint tightly. This prevents the shaft from being split by the tang of either the blade or the butt. The shaft is made of either sitet (*Grewia* sp.) or yemit (*Olea* sp.). The glue (tonyon) is obtained from the latex of either gereswet or kamaterwa (both *Euphorbia* spp.). Assembling of the swoger and putting the finishing touches to it is done by a member of the kuret on a voluntary basis. Any assistance he may require e.g. in obtaining glue or cow's tail-skin, he will receive from other members of his own kuret insofar as possible.

As far as I have been able to find out, no special ritual is observed before, during or after the actual forging of the iron parts of the swoger. After the swoger has been completed, a short consecration ceremony, about which more below, is held and after that the swoger may be used.

#### The use of the swoger in wedding ceremonies

The foremost importance of the swoger lies in its ritual role of legalizing marriage as a tribal institution and as such it both serves as and symbolises a social bond, keeping the tribe together through marriage. It is available to every male member of the tribe and although a certain measure of magical power is ascribed to it, and some taboos connected with it, it is not in itself regarded as sacred.

Unlike other spears, which are owned by individuals or families, the swoger is decidedly a communal possession for both Marakwet and Endo, insofar as each section of a location (kuret) has at least one of its own, which is generally kept by one of the most respected elders of that kuret. Although there is considerable variation in the details of the various accounts of the use of the swoger, its function

in marriage can be outlined as follows.

When a young man wants to marry, his father sets out to the homestead of the proposed girl's parents, and talks things over. When it appears that no restrictions on the marriage in the way of clan relationship exist, and when the father of the girl consents to the marriage, the father of the groom returns home and tells his son the outcome of his visit. The groom then goes to the elder who in his section keeps the swoger and tells him of his intentions, after which the elder will hand over the swoger. He now sets off in the company of one or more friends, to the house of the bride, where her father will give away his daughter to become the suitor's wife. The swoger is witness and proof of the giving away. Nobody could take a bride without having a swoger. Nobody can be refused a bride if he has a swoger, or so I was told. The groom now returns home, followed by his wife-to-be, and his friend(s), in that order. He still carries the swoger, and sometimes a shield. On returning home the swoger is handed back to the elder from whom he took it, so as to be ready for use by anyone else who may need it. This trip can take place as long as one year after the initial agreement over the marriage. It always takes place towards or after sunset. No light is carried. After arriving at the groom's homestead and after having settled down, the bride starts preparing honey-beer, which, when ready, is taken by the father of the groom to the father of the bride. The swoger is also taken and in this case may be carried by the elder in whose custody it usually is, as he is always invited to the party. On such occasions the elder may wear a pointed cap, made of baboon and Colobus monkey-skin, called kotit. Usually, some other friends accompany him as well on this important trip. At the homestead of the bride's father the final settlement of the marriage takes place, during which the honey-beer is consumed. The swoger is placed against the wall inside the house. After the groom's father has returned home, yet another year may pass before the actual wedding ceremony takes place.

Here the swoger from the groom's kuret is not used, but the swogerisiek from the bride's and from the bride's mother's kuret are brought, and are present throughout the feasting. On most occasions when matters of marriage are discussed the swoger is present, and it may have a vague phallic meaning, as the principal idea behind it would appear to be that its presence safeguards the fertility and subsequent progeny of the tribe. As the only reason for divorce accepted in the tribe is barrenness, the swoger is not present on occasions when dissolution of marriage is discussed.

When the swoger is taken from the elder who keeps it, the responsibility for it lies with the man who has taken it. If for instance the groom or his father on one of their trips to or from the bride's homestead accidentally drops the swoger, the marriage is in great danger of annulment. In such a case the elders are summoned to the spot of the incident, and their verdict is binding as to the outcome of the (impending) marriage. If the swoger is dropped with its blade pointing in the direction in which the person was proceeding at the moment of the mishap, it is not serious and the marriage is not endangered. It is quite possible that a swoger would be accidentally dropped as described above, as it is normally carried dangling in the

0  
10  
20  
30  
40  
50 cm



fig.1



fig.2



fig.3



fig.4



fig.5



fig.7 (a)



(b)

1. ng'ot with malian (sheath); 2. asieperet; 3. merieget;  
4. almeroto; 5. swoger; 7(a). blade of swoger (cross-section);  
7(b). Ng'ot blade (cross-section).

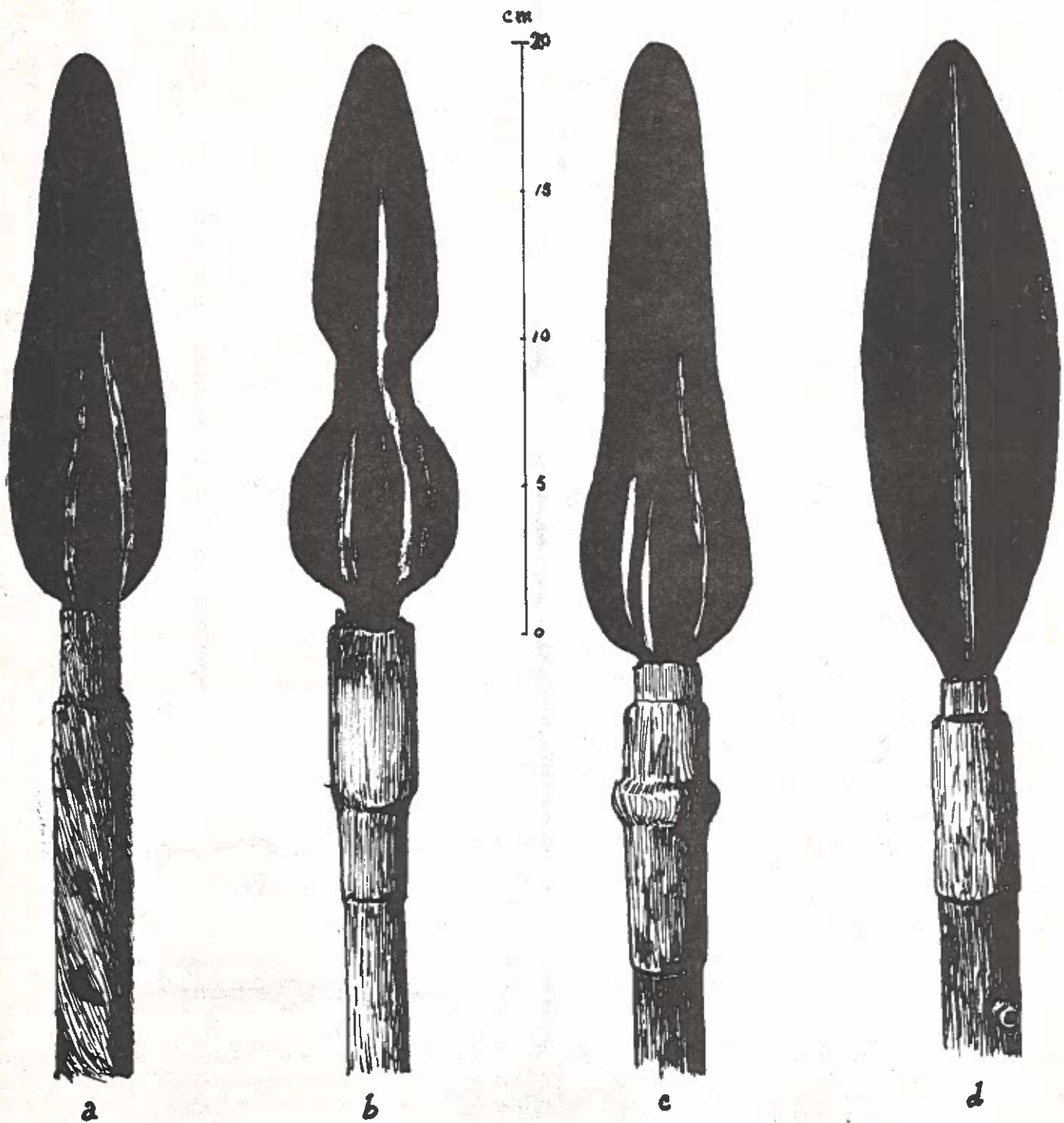
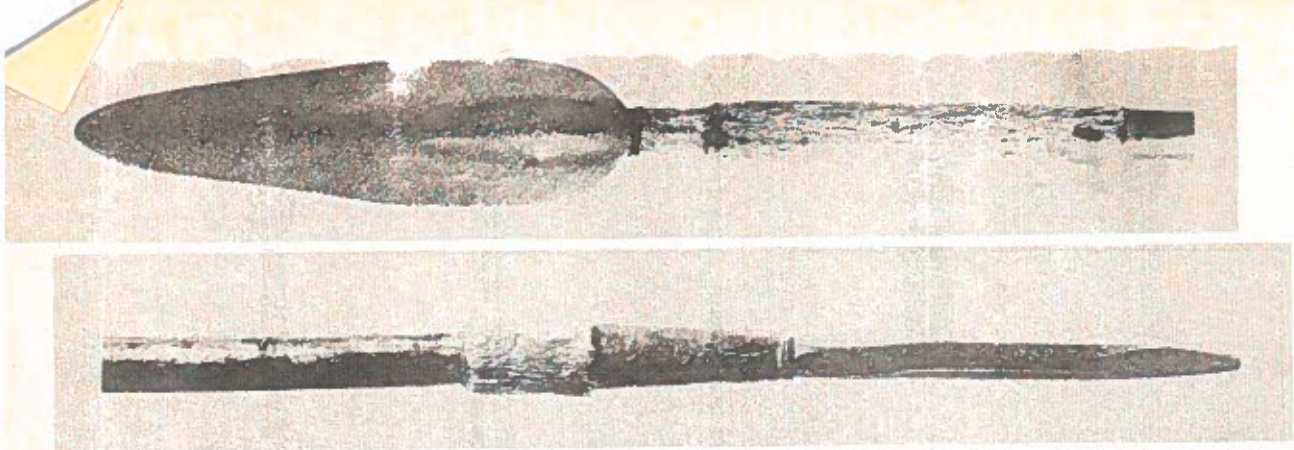


fig.6. (a) swoger from Talai location; (b) swoger from Sambirir location; (c) swoger from Chesekon, Endo location; (d) swoger from near Chesoi, Sambirir location.

right hand, horizontally, the blade pointing forwards. Considering the ruggedness of the terrain, one could easily lose one's balance, and so accidentally drop the swoger. If the swoger is dropped across the path, either pointing left or right, or worse still, pointing backwards, it is considered a particularly bad omen, and before picking it up, some grass should be put on it<sup>3</sup>. The place is then clearly marked, preferably by placing a heavy branch or rock at the spot, pointing in the same direction as the fallen swoger. The elders are then called, and all proceed to the place of the incident. The unfortunate person who dropped the swoger has in most cases to provide honey-beer and a sheep or goat, which is slaughtered at the spot. The honey-beer is drunk, and the elders discuss the situation. During this time the swoger may not be placed inside a house for fear that ill-luck might befall its occupants. After the elders have given their verdict, the swoger has to be purified by spitting honey-beer onto it. If the swoger has been dropped pointing backwards, the verdict will usually be an annulment of the marriage, whether it is still to take place or whether it has already occurred. Matters are even worse if the swoger gets broken. This invariably results in the marriage arrangements being annulled. The bride returns to her father's homestead and the groom has to look for another girl. Here also, the elders are called and scrutinize the place of the incident, while the man responsible has to provide honey-beer and maybe a goat. After the elders are satisfied as to the reason why the swoger was broken, they go back home, where the swoger (which in this case too should never be placed inside a house), has to be purified before it may be used again, and as it can only be purified when it is complete, the man responsible has to fit it with a new shaft first. A meeting of elders is then called, and from all neighbouring locations to which the swoger might possibly be taken for future marriages, elders are invited to witness the ceremony. This because otherwise they might object to a girl from their location marrying any man bringing this swoger (as undoubtedly they will have heard of the incident). The swoger is then treated as a new one, just as one newly come from the smith would be treated. And while some honey-beer, the only drink thought fit for such occasions, is spat upon the swoger, the elders proclaim that they accept the swoger for their kuret, and that they expect it to bring good wives to the young men of their kuret, and to safeguard their off-spring. It is thus restored to its former value, and can be used again without restriction.

If in a given kuret a swoger is not available for e.g. a marriage ceremony, owing to its having been taken somewhere else, the person wanting one may go to a nearby kuret and beg to take the swoger from that kuret. Under normal circumstances this request is never refused, on the principle of give-and-take. However, if this situation occurs too often, it may be decided to obtain a second swoger, which then is kept by another elder of the same kuret. This may happen when the population of the kuret has increased considerably. The cost of the new swoger and its consecration are borne communally and usually paid in kind or services.

One exception to the practice of borrowing the swoger from the neighbouring kuret should be noted, viz., when the nearest swoger is that of a smith and his relatives. Smiths always have their own swoger, because they and their families were a despised class among the Marakwet and Endo, as is the case among most if not all Kalenjin-speakers.

Consequently their swoger was thought to be unfit for use by ordinary people.

#### Other functions of the Swoger

Apart from its function in marriage, the swoger may be used in a number of other socio-ritual functions. If a person has to take an oath before a council of elders, for instance in a case of theft, he is made to step over a swoger laid on the ground, while saying: "If I have stolen any property of So-and-so, may this swoger eat me" (i.e. may the swoger withhold its blessing from my family, so that my offspring die). This oath may also be taken on any other spear. It is said however, that taking it on the swoger makes it stronger, as it invokes the worst punishment imaginable<sup>4</sup>. Another form of oath involving the swoger is when the tip of the blade is dipped into a brew made of honey-beer and castor-oil. Both parties are required to lick the brew off the blade, again using the formula quoted above. The swoger is then left for about a week in the house of the complainant. It is said that, if guilty, the accused will either confess during this week or else will die within a few months after taking the oath. If someone is threatened by another party, he may seek refuge with the swoger till his case has been sorted out by the elders. While the swoger is kept by this person, nobody would dare to let him come to any harm.

In times of tribal warfare the swoger was used by the elders to stop the advancing enemy. The Suk (traditional enemies of the Marakwet), who themselves have no such ritual spear, are nevertheless said to have believed in, and respected, its magical power. To this end the swoger was placed across the path of the advancing enemy, who dared not step over it. If they were not stopped by it, so I was told, one of the elders would go to salvage it at the risk of his own life. This makes the above story sound rather doubtful. However, no Marakwet would step over a swoger thus placed in his path. When making peace with enemy tribes, the swoger is used and respected. For this ceremony it is laid on the ground and subsequently five representatives of each of the rival parties step from opposite sides over the swoger, each swearing to abstain from any hostilities towards the other, in the way as set out for the oath-taking ritual (above)<sup>5</sup>.

Although some parts of Marakwet country have a very low, and sometimes erratic rainfall (especially Endo and Sambirir), the swoger is not used in rainmaking ceremonies, as might perhaps have been expected. If rain-making is required, the Marakwet ask an Elgeyo rainmaker for his services.

#### Taboos, responsibilities and abuse regarding the Swoger

Women may not touch the swoger unless they are past the age of child-birth as it is considered to affect their fertility adversely. If a woman does accidentally touch the swoger, a purification ceremony has to be held, the necessary honey-beer and goat being provided by the husband (or the father if the girl is unmarried).

A swoger may not be placed with its blade in or pointing to the ground, nor can its butt be used to ram it in the ground, as may be done



with ordinary spears. It should always be placed upright (point-upwards) against a wall, tree or rock. If it is blown over by the wind or falls because it was poorly placed, this does not appear to matter.

A swoger may never be sold, or disposed of in a different way, unless it has been replaced by another one, which first must be properly consecrated, and the ritual value transferred from the old swoger. The old one has to be proclaimed obsolete. Even so, the elders are not easily induced to part with the old swoger; the younger generation seems to be less concerned about this.

When not in use the swoger is kept by one of the elders in his house, usually somewhere up in the rafters. Should the house be destroyed by fire, its owner is supposed to do his utmost to salvage the swoger from the flames. If he fails in his attempt, or if nobody is present, and the swoger is destroyed completely, it is accepted as an inevitable accident. If in the latter case the bits and pieces of the swoger are recovered and are not damaged too badly, they may be taken and reassembled. After a consecration ceremony as described above (for the case of a broken swoger), it may then function again. But if the blade and butt are badly burnt or distorted, the council of elders is summoned and shown what is left of the swoger, so that everybody may know that this swoger was damaged beyond repair and not taken by somebody with evil intentions. The parts are then proclaimed useless and discarded.

In the unlikely event of someone attempting to steal the swoger, the person responsible for it should defend it if necessary with his life. Under no circumstances may he use the swoger itself to ward off the thief. He should use an ordinary spear or club for this purpose.

If somebody is found guilty of some act of negligence or malice involving the swoger, he is fined by a council of elders according to the seriousness of his misdemeanours. The fine is payable in goats, sheep or cattle, and may be very heavy. The worst wrong one can do to the swoger is to break it by malice, presumably with the intent of casting a spell over somebody. A person who does this deliberately may be put to death or banned from the tribal society and be cursed for life.

#### Geographical variations in use

The foregoing account on the use and functions of the swoger is mainly based on information from the Eastern part of Marakwet country (Endo and Sambirir). In the Southern and Western parts of the country differences in the use of the swoger are noticeable; on the whole one gets the impression that the taboos and consequences in the use of the swoger are less stringent. Thus it appears to be permissible for a man to request a woman to hand him the swoger, or to move it from one place in the homestead to another. In such cases it would not be harmful to the woman concerned. Similarly, it is stated that the swoger may be personal property, for the use of which by outsiders a fee may be asked. But in those cases where the swoger is communal property it is left in the homestead of the person who used it last

(it is not returned to a particular elder). However, throughout any ritual where its presence is required, the swoger is carried by an elder, relieving the younger men from the responsibilities connected with its custody. Young girls are allowed to touch it. Purification ceremonies seem not to be as necessary as they are in the Eastern part, and in any case are not so elaborate. The spitting and drinking of some honey-beer seems sufficient. Before picking up a fallen swoger it suffices to rub one's hands with some sheep/goat-dung, and to take some grass in the hand with which one is going to pick it up.

Notes:

1. Other forms of the word swoger (sing. indef.) are: swogerto (sing.def.); swogertin (plur. indef.); and swogerisiek (plur. def.).
2. Cf. Hollis, A.C. 1909. The Nandi, Language & Folklore p. 62, dealing with marriage customs. "The journey has to be undertaken with great care; nobody must stumble, as this would be a sign of an unhappy marriage, and were one of the party to look behind it would mean that the bride would be driven out of, or would fly from, her husband's house back to her parents".

There would appear to be a similarity in the person stumbling and the swoger falling, and also in the person looking behind and the swoger pointing backwards.

3. Ibid. p. 78: "If a warrior drops a weapon he must throw some grass on it before he picks it up".
4. Ibid. p. 85: "The form of oath which is binding to all Nandi men is to strike a spear with a club or to step over a spear (preferably one which has killed a man) and to say: Kw-am-a melel (May the blade eat me)."
5. Cf. Massam J.A., 1927, The Cliffdwellers of Kenya, p. 3 quoting Lugard's 'Rise of our East African Empire', Vol.1, where he describes an encounter with the Elgeyo: "However, out stolid indifference had its effect and before long the excitable chief laid down his spear and shield in the path and stepped over them as an oath of peace; we did the same with a walking-stick, and his ardour for battle was appeased".