

AN ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF BURIAL PRACTICES AMONG THE POKOT PEOPLE OF WEST POKOT DISTRICT

Isaac Wasike Were

Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi.

Introduction

The origin of death, which consequently leads to the burial ceremony, is still a mystery in many African communities. The beliefs pertaining to death and burial rituals are, therefore, diverse and variable. Death itself is full of emotions, speculations and thus the study of it is dynamic in nature. Death is not only a common enemy among the Pokot, but is also considered as a cruel punishment from the supreme being "Tororot". According to oral tradition among the Pokot, death is the last and greatest evil of all and nothing can soften its sting (see also Beech 1911).

Although the importance attached to it varies from country to country, the burial system is still an important phenomenon the world over. In Kenya for instance, most communities regard burial of the dead as being a very important and respected institution. Among the Pokot community, burial is considered as a journey to the next world and the act of burying an individual is taken as an act of escorting the deceased to the next world. Like in many African communities, burying is said to be the saddest moment that the bereaved family relatives and friends undergo in Pokot community.

It is against this background, that this paper presents an overview of an ethnoarchaeological study of the mortuary practices among the Pokot people. This paper is based on a study that was carried out amongst the Pokot people of West Pokot District, between November 1990 and January 1991, entitled **An Ethnoarchaeological Study of Mortuary Practices among the Pokot People**. The main concern was the documentation of the community's burial ceremonies. The concern arose from a preliminary observation that burial ceremonies varied for individuals, mainly due to their socio-economic backgrounds.

Research site

West Pokot District is located in the Rift Valley Province along Kenya's Western boundary with the Republic of Uganda. It is surrounded by five Kenyan districts, namely, Keiyo, Marakwet, Turkana, Baringo and Trans-Nzoia. The district is predominantly occupied by the Pokot people.

West Pokot District covers an area of approximately 9100 square kilometers, which is about 5% of the total area of the Rift Valley Province. It is included among the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL), with maximum temperatures of about 36° Centigrade. Vast parts of the district receive rainfall of between 400mm and 600mm a year. The altitude varies greatly over the district. The highest point is 3370 metres above sea level on the Cherengany Hills. The Wei-Wei and Kerio River basins occupy the lowest points in the district of approximately 900 metres in reference to the sea level. The numerous hills and ridges are major catchment areas for many streams and springs, most of which flow towards Lake Turkana.

Socio-economic Activities

Little is known about the early history of the Pokot community. However, it is an established possibility that they shared similar origins with other Nilotic groups. According to Beech (1911), evidence of the origin of the Pokot people tends to support the oral tradition, which may be taken to be substantially correct at this point. According to the evidence, there were two original Pokot groups living on the Elgeyo Escarpment. These were, the Chok and Seker. However, due to fugitives adventures from the Samburu, Nandi, Turkana and Karamojong, the Chok and Seker started intermarrying with them. As a result, the modern Pokot people emerged.

This origin is supported by linguistic evidence. For instance, the Pokot language is full of words borrowed from their neighbours such as the Nandi. It is partly because of this that the Pokot language is sometimes referred to as a Nandi dialect. The word *end* is the connecting link between the Nandi peoples. Further linguistic evidence shows that similar place names appear among different groups of people. For example, Sigor is a common name in the Pokot community, and is also found among the Keiyo, Marakwet as well as Turgen peoples. Another element of the Pokot tribe is traced from the Karamojong people who occupy the northern part of the Republic of Uganda (Huntingford 1953).

Until independence in 1963, West Pokot District was known as West Suk (West Pokot District Atlas, 1985). West Pokot is one of the districts where modern social and economic development seem to have started later than in most parts of the country. It was remote from the centres of early social and economic development, and its rugged topography has made access to many of its resources difficult. In general, the population density is considerably below that of other districts with similar potential. The Pokot are exogamous and, thus practice variable lifestyles including burial rituals.

Like the Maasai, the Pokot are among the least acculturated communities of East Africa. According to Meyerhoff (1982), they have traditionally remained aloof from the pressure of modernisation and development. They are a proud people who treasure their traditions to the last item. The tribal spirit was and to a large extent still is, an important element in their solidarity. The Pokot are a culturally united people; members take pride in their language, dressing, rites, territory and other special characteristics that differentiate them from other communities. Although there is little literature on the Pokot people and their kinship, the husband is the head of the house while the wife is responsible for the welfare of the family. The Pokot are patrilineal. In day-to-day life, gender roles are clearly defined, with women bearing the greatest burden of labour.

Both men and women undergo circumcision rites, which represent an important transition stage in their life cycles. Indeed, the initiation of both men and women is usually considered a passage from childhood to adulthood. This particular concept is, therefore, taken seriously in one's life. Initiation of males, for instance, usually connects with some kind of institutionalised age-grouping, which may consist of age-sets or age-grades or both.

A Pokot man may have as many wives as he can afford; hence, the Pokot people are generally polygamous. The bride-price is carefully calculated and honoured. But should a woman be barren, she is divorced by her husband. However, the husband is required to pay some goats and grain to the woman's father as a compensation for having had her as a wife (Adamson, 1975). The married women were easily recognised not only by their ornaments, but also by a leather bracelet worn on their right wrist which must always remain there.

This traditional bracelet presently equals wedding ring.

A council of elders exists and is extremely powerful in the Pokot society. Its functions include control over land, livestock, forests, pasture, water, peace and order, and native norms and customs. Its members are drawn from the richer, wiser, more talented and most influential members of their clans. Like in life, the members of the council of elders are accorded special ceremonies during their burial rites.

Inheritance is well organised in Pokot society. The death of a person usually raises the question of what must be done with his/her property. When an old man dies, his property is inherited by the oldest son. However, in case of a mother dying, her belongings are inherited by the youngest son. Although, it is not common for a deceased, while still living, to inform his close relatives or friends about the distribution of his property, his wishes if any, are adhered to at all cost because the word of a dead person is never violated.

Extensive livestock-production is one of the most appropriate types of land use in the district because of its adaptability to the highly variable environmental conditions. Indeed, livestock are a critical source of income for many communities in the district. Dairy production and sales of live animals and animal products constitute important sources of income, employment and food supply among the people. Due to the harsh environment, most of the Pokot people spend much of their time searching for seasonal pasture and water for their livestock. To this group, cattle play an important role in their lives. Apart from providing milk, blood and meat as food, the hides are used as clothes and bedding. Cattle are also used as bride price as well as items for ritual ceremonies. Like in many African communities, livestock ownership also has a significant impact on one's social status. Indeed, the wealth of a traditional Pokot man is largely determined by the number of livestock he owns. Raiding for livestock from other communities has been part and parcel of their traditional culture. Indeed, it is one way in which young men display their qualities, as well as obtain animals for the purpose of paying dowry.

The Pokot also practise some subsistence farming of millet, tobacco, maize, cassava, finger millet and bananas, particularly in areas with conditions suitable for such farming. However, in areas limited rainfall, they practice some sort of irrigation agriculture by utilising the force of gravity from hilly areas. Although nobody knows exactly who might have introduced the irrigation system among the Pokot people, traditionally, it is believed that the practice might have been borrowed from a section of agricultural neighbours, in particular the Masai, Nandi or Luhya. From our survey, crop yields are generally low in the district. The principal technique for maintaining soil fertility is the application of livestock manure. In the remote parts of the district, customary land tenure arrangements prevail, and crop production is carried out by individual households, and land rights are exclusive for the period of cultivation.

The rationale of the study

- Burial in cemeteries or in common graveyards is a recent phenomenon in most African societies; It is believed to have been brought about by the coming of early Christianity. A study of this kind will, therefore, contribute to the understanding of pre-colonial societies as far as burial systems were concerned, especially where written records are limited.
- This study aims at providing information in order to assist future archaeologists or anthropologists in interpreting burial sites and their related items among the Pokot

people. This is possible because in the countryside (West Pokot District), you can easily spot many large stone cairns, most of which mark human graves.

- Distinctive burial and funeral practices are common among different communities. These practices usually contain valuable information which can be used in tracing some of the socio-cultural characteristics of prehistoric societies. Indeed, Chapman (1982:201) has observed that "mortuary practices have symbolised the culture of certain societies". It is, therefore, through such investigation that one can determine the burial context within the grave and the mode of disposition of the body in a particular society.
- Mortuary practices reveal the type of religious beliefs in the society in which the deceased belonged. In fact, Nida (1954: 14) has argued that death and its rituals are generally accorded the greatest religious ceremonies, because death is also taken as the transition to the spiritual world (see also Binford 1971, Visser 1989).

Methodology

The main study was carried out using a structured questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions. The questions were purposively made open-ended in order to capture the free expressions of the respondents. Since the research site is sparsely populated, the non-probability sampling technique was used to select the subject of study. The unit of analysis was the individual, with both men and women serving as respondents. In all, the questionnaire was administered to 50 respondents, 30 men and 20 women, which represented fifty different cases of burial rituals in the rural setting. The respondents constituted members of the council of elders, circumcisers, village elders, teachers, traditional mid-wives and healers, as well as funeral preachers among other dignified members of the community.

Besides the use of a structured questionnaire, I employed the direct observation technique by personally attending ten burial ceremonies. This particular method was paramount for the study because it presented an actual finding on the ground. The Pokot traditional burial ceremonies take place during the early part of the morning or late in the evening. Most burial rituals are carried out secretly and any foreigner among the mourners was avoided at all cost. For this reason, it was impossible for me to take photographs during burial proceedings.

Research Findings

From the research, it was found that death is a common enemy and as soon as one dies or the news of the death is broken, the women around the dead or in the homestead concerned start mourning by wailing loudly. This conventional signal normally attracts most of the neighbours, who unknowingly or otherwise join by wailing too. Mourning provides a recognised channel for the expression of true solidarity through grief. Although the duration of mourning depends on sex, cause of death, age or social status of the deceased, there is usually enough time allocated in order to inform the relatives and friends of the deceased. Mourning is accompanied by ceremonial rites which are usually respected.

Although burial rites varied from one clan to another among the Pokot community, burial itself is largely considered as the beginning of a journey to the next world. The majority (40 out of 50 respondents) of the population subjected to the interview confirmed that the act of

burying a body is regarded as an act of escorting the deceased to the spiritual world. This moment is usually characterised by mourning among the bereaved members as well as friends and neighbours. However, they console themselves by avowing that such a sorrowful moment in life is but a stage that one has to undergo in order to reach the spiritual world.

Burial takes place in the homestead of the deceased. The whole process of burying is left entirely upon the relatives and close friends of the deceased. But should these people fail to turn up, burial experts and funeral preachers are given the responsibility of organising and burying the body, for which they are paid in return.

The traditional Pokot believes that there is life after death, particularly for those individuals who live in harmony. It is, therefore, certain that when a person dies, he proceeds to the next world. Although this may be the common notion that governs the general situation after death, there are some individuals who are believed to have reached the end of their "living" and, thus, they have no other life beyond death. From research, these people include murderers, witches, individuals who have committed suicide, as well as outcasts in the society. Such people are not buried upon their death; instead, they are either thrown in the bushes or left in the wilderness.

The cause of death plays an important role in determining the mortuary practices among the population studied. There were seven cases reported during the study where cause of death determined the burial ritual. For instance, individuals who meet their death through suicidal means, or who are killed in raids, or through road accidents are not buried.

Like in many other African traditional communities, the Pokot people do have individuals who express their desire on how their bodies should be buried or treated upon their death. Although such wishes are rare, they are habitually honoured and strictly adhered to.

The "spirit of the below" has a link with the patrilineal ancestors, the *kuko* (ancestral spirits). From the findings, it was apparent that there existed a strong belief in ancestors. The ancestors are believed to be living below as the *Werkoyon* (prophet) or seer. In this regard, a dead person can appear from the underworld in various forms, notably animals or snakes. Most of the informants claimed that the common forms are snakes (puff-adder or python). Indeed, the appearance of a python in a homestead or in a house is considered as a visit by an ancestor who has honoured them with a visit and given them his blessings. A visiting python is appeased with some milk and tobacco, failing which, it is believed, one of the family members may die. A good relationship between the ancestors and the living people is kept mutual through constant offering of sacrifices, in the form of livestock and farm products. In case of evil spirits, sacrifices are offered next to the graves of the suspected ancestors. However, in cases where sacrifices fail to materialise, alternative means are employed. For instance, burial transfer was mentioned in the research as one of the alternatives.

Discussion

Like in most African traditional societies, burial rites among the Pokot are largely determined by sex, age, social status roles, etc. Males are normally accorded a more elaborated system of burial as opposed to adult females who are buried uniformly regardless of their age and status. For instance, most females are buried naked, outside the huts on the left hand side.

The Pokot community is socially stratified. As in life, stratification also influence ones burial. Males of recognised social status in the society and aged over 45 years, are buried in their kraal or in stone cairns. Male elders who occupy special roles in the society, such as

prophets, rainmakers, traditional healers, circumcisers, wealthy elders, village elders and funeral preachers are buried with their bodies wrapped in fresh cow skin. Males of medium social status, married and aged below 45 year are normally accorded simple burials outside their huts. Females with similar social status as above are also given simple burials but differences come on the location of the grave. Infants are buried outside their mother's huts on the periphery or near the walls.

Witches, impotents as well as barren women occupy the lowest social status in the community. Upon their death, they are either left or disposed of in bushes, for wild animals such as hyenas and vultures to prey on the corpses. In daily life, these individuals are regarded as social misfits and, therefore, any colourful treatment following their death is avoided. The cause of death is another critical consideration in determining burial rites. Persons who die in violence, such as through a suicidal act, or being killed in raids, are not buried. Their burials would mean direct confrontation between the living and the ancestors.

The corpses of both males and females are oriented towards the east (where the sun rises). However, variations come about in the positioning of the hands. Males are laid in a manner in which the top part of the body rests on the right hand side, whereas females rest on the left hand side. But among the Seker Pokot, those bodies accorded burials are laid facing towards the Seker Hills, where they are believed to have originated from.

Location of graves within the homesteads indicates that apart from the usual use of the homestead, it is also a family cemetery among the Pokot people. The study has also shown that the burial position is another vital indicator in determining the sex as well as social status of human remains in a burial site found in Pokotland.

Conclusion

Despite various changes and differences evident in the history of mortuary practices among the Pokot, continuity may be seen over several millennia in the ways and means in which dead bodies are treated.

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