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## The Symbolism of Fire among the Karimojong of North Eastern Uganda

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### Abstract:

The article "symbolism of fire among the Karimojong of North Eastern Uganda" is discussing about the meaning/significance of fire in the Karimojong community. The symbolism of fire in the Karimojong community did not start in the recent times; but it dates back to their dispersion area around Lake Turkana on the Valley of river Omo. Fire among the Karimojong symbolizes life and this life has to be celebrated from childhood, adolescent, adulthood to death. This life is celebrated when the child is born, initiation during teenage life, at succession ceremony and at death. The celebration of life is central in the Karimojong community of North Eastern Uganda.

**Keywords:** Hominin, fire, Paleolithic

### 1. Introduction

Karamoja is a place where the Karimojong people live. The Karimojong people are semi-nomadic people who practice agriculture and the keeping of cattle as their main activity. This article therefore would like to discuss the symbolism of fire among the Karimojong. Fire is 'a process of combustion which is manifested by heat and light.'<sup>1</sup> In the Ancient times, the Greek philosophers considered fire as one of the elements which makes up the universe. The Greek philosophers recognized fire as a force in its own right and included it among the four elements of the universe: 'earth, water, air and fire.'<sup>2</sup> It was during 'Paleolithic'<sup>3</sup> period that, human groups learnt how to tap the force of fire as an available asset for society; whereby the people used this force for production purposes. In East Africa for example, 'the earliest fire evidence with human associations so far comes from the area of Lake Turkana in Northern Kenya'<sup>4</sup>. This is why I can assert that the Karimojong use of fire predates to this era. During their migration, the Karimojong and the Turkana used this route in the cause of their migration from Ethiopian highlands to their present habitat. Bruno Novelli while researching about the Karimojong way of life confirmed that, the cradle of the Karimojong people is located 'on the Northern portion of Lake Turkana but some suggest the valley of the river Omo a tributary of the same Lake. This is the place that the three Large groups migrated towards West (Bari and Lotuho), towards the South (Samburu and Maasai), and in an intermediate direction towards Lake Kyoga and Lake Victoria (Teso, Itesyo, Karimojong, Turkana, Jie, Dodoz, Topoza, Jiye and Nyangatom.'<sup>5</sup> However, this article deals with the Karimojong symbolism of fire; who belong to third group in their migration to their present habitat in North Eastern Uganda.

At the time of the 'Hominins'<sup>6</sup>, fire was used regularly for burning as fuel. This is the time that fire was domesticated through various trials and human beings created bond with fire. The people managed to make fire burn continuously and used it to control their natural environment; fire at this time became part of human life and society, it increased people's productivity and destructiveness. From this time fire has been used for heating, lighting, clearing land, cooking and worship. This article therefore wants in a particular way to understand the symbolism of fire in the Karimojong community. The term symbol means a complex of gestures, sounds, images and words that arose, invite and persuade participation in what they refer.'<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Johan, Goudsblom, 'Human Use and Consequences of Fire' in Wright, James D., *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Vol. 9, (New York: Copyright, 2015), P. 197

<sup>2</sup> Stephen, Happel, 'Symbol' in Peter E., Fink, *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), P. 200

<sup>3</sup> John, Goudsblom, this is an anthropological term which relates to the characteristics of the cultures of the early Stone Age. Paleolithic period is a time of Stone Age which begun at around 2.5 to 2 million years ago. This period was marked by use of tools made out of stone and wood. This period is sometimes described as Old Stone Age and it appeared first in Africa around Lake Turkana.

<sup>4</sup> John Goulet & Richard Wragham, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00067270x.2012.756754> (accessed on 8/8/2020)

<sup>5</sup> Bruno, Novelli, Aspect of Karimojong Ethnosociology, Verona: Museum Combonianum no. 44, 1988), P. 27 - 28

<sup>6</sup> The word *Hominin* originates from a Latin word *Homin* which means human being or Man. The plural of the word in Latin becomes *Hominini* which means human beings or Men. However, the word itself is an anthropological term which means 'any member of the group which consists of all modern and extinct humans and all their immediate ancestors.' (Cf. Dictionary.com)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Stephen, Happel, 'Symbol', P. 1238

## 2. The Karimojong Understanding of a Symbol

The Karimojong understanding of the symbol is that, it is something associated with something else that it signifies and represents, not on an arbitrary basis, but on a sort of likeness. The Karimojong symbolism therefore is very much visible in their rituals, both public and private. Both public and private rituals express in their symbolic actions, the visible and tangible realities which when observed are by nature invisible and intangible. Some people can say that, such kind of mentality may be contradictory for the pragmatic people like the Karimojong. But Bruno Novelli says that, the Karimojong in this way use 'the principle of analogy which enters into the problem of connections between the invisible world and the visible one. And, of course there is no contradiction in this process with the Karimojong's pragmatic mentality because abstract concepts are rendered in this way concrete, and therefore understandable through the use of symbols.'<sup>8</sup> In this case a symbol becomes an expression of a more immediate and concrete way of thinking in that, to say that, someone is for example a lion is to mean that he/she is courageous.

Fire is believed to have purifying effects in the Karimojong community and culture; this is why fire is a symbol of life. Communal fires for example are used and understood as the centre of people's life and it is considered sacred. Fire as one of the four elements which make up the universe is used by the Karimojong people in their worship and daily activities. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger echoes this view of using elements of the cosmos for Worship that:

the Catholic Liturgy is the Liturgy of the Word made flesh-made flesh for the sake of the Resurrection. [...] Thus, it is clear that not only do the human body and signs from the cosmos play an essential role in the Liturgy but that the matter of this world is part of the Liturgy. Matter comes into the Liturgy in two ways: first, in the form of many kinds of symbols-the holy fire of Easter night, the Candle and flame that burns on it.<sup>9</sup>

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger continues to highlight that, fire as one of the elements which makes up the universe is very essential in human life, whereby the human beings use these elements to worship Him. These elements come to the Liturgy:

as a meditation of divine action. For these elements, which the Lord Himself chose, are full of meaning. We need to meditate on them as such if we are to understand the spirit of the Liturgy better. [...] Let us remember in parenthesis here that of the four elements in antiquity-water, air, fire and earth-the first three are all symbols of the Holy Spirit while the earth represents man, who comes from the earth and to the earth returns. Fire and air in the form of breath are present in many ways in the symbolism of the Liturgy.<sup>10</sup>

In the Catholic Church for example, the lighting of the Easter Candle was introduced in the service of the *lucernarium*.

In the age when there were no electric lights, the lighting of lamps at nightfall was a daily family ritual; it brought joy and ensured security. The ritual had its place especially at the start of a banquet of friends and among Jews, at the start of the Friday evening meal that marked the beginning of the Sabbath. Christians liked to think of this evening light as an image of Christ the light of the world. Thus, beginning in the fourth century, the lighting of the lamp at the beginning of community meals was accompanied by a hymn to Christ as joyous light of the Father's Eternal glory. The holiest night of the year could not be allowed to begin without a solemn celebration of light.<sup>11</sup>

However, this article is going to discuss about the symbolism of fire in the Karimojong community of North Eastern Uganda.

## 3. Karimojong Symbolism of Fire

The symbolism of fire among the Karimojong people of North Eastern Uganda is life. Fire is a symbol of life because it is used during birth of a child, initiation rites of the young people to adulthood, and at the time of death. Fire used in these rituals is believed to be sacred, because every time fire is used in these celebrations, it is carefully given attention not to desecrate the ceremony.

Symbolism among the Karimojong is a tool used to grasp the reality of the invisible world. This is because the Karimojong people recognize that, there are certain powers of unknown origin which affect or influence people's life and they need to be understood, hence they use symbols to make them concrete. Through symbolism, the invisible world is made visible or concrete.

The Karimojong try to understand 'these powers which are mysterious, because they are not being perceived by the senses, they escape the possibility of control with normal means at their disposal, and yet important, since their influence on people's life renders it impossible to ignore them.'<sup>12</sup> This is also expressed most times in their rituals and these rituals may be public or private. These symbols are expressed in their tangible and visible manner. Some of these realities are tangible and invisible by nature, so the symbol makes them concrete. For example, water in Karamoja is used for blessing people and animals using couch-grass. A symbol in this case is something which is associated with another thing which it signifies and represents.

The Karimojong also in this area of symbolism use the principle of analogy, because it connects the invisible world with the visible one. In this way a symbol is understood as expression of a more immediate and concrete way of thinking. So, when the Karimojong refer themselves as fire places/hearths (*ngikenoi*), they mean that, they have sections of life power in their community. This means therefore that, they consist of fire places/hearths (*ngikenoi*), symbolized by fire.

<sup>8</sup> Bruno, Novelli, Karimojong Traditional Religion: A Contribution, Kampala: Bibliotheca Comboniana 4-AL, 1999, P. LXXVII

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Cardinal, Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), P.220

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Cardinal, Ratzinger, P. 221-222

<sup>11</sup> Pierre, Jounel, 'The Easter Cycle,' in A. G., Martimort, Ed., *The Church at Prayer: The liturgy and Time*, Vol. IV, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986), P. 37

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Bruno, Novelli, P. XLIX

Fire is a symbol of passion and love. Fire burns away everything unclean. Many peoples treat the fire in the hearth as sacred. It is a guarantee that, family life will continue. The fire burning in a hearth is an assurance that a family always has nourishment and warmth. [...] the sacred fire of love [...] never allows that inner blaze to be extinguished, but will help to ensure that, this world remains a warmer and more vital place, that love never goes out in human hearts, and that people always have true nourishment.<sup>13</sup>

The symbol of fire therefore 'has the value of reality it identifies in a certain way with reality, even though it keeps always its mystic aura, generated by the sense of mystery always present when the world religion is contacted'<sup>14</sup> and celebrated.

The Karimojong people referring themselves as consisting of fire places or hearths; reflect the three major groups of the Karimojong, and these three groups are compared with the three stones used for cooking. These groups are Bokora, Matheniko and the Pian and each one of them is referred to as fire place/hearths or *ngikenoi*. The word *ngikenoi* literally means 'fire places/hearth with the three stones and figuratively, the places where the Karimojong come from, the root of the Karimojong people.'<sup>15</sup>In these fire places/hearths (*ngikenoi*) there might be intermarriages between them because they are distant relatives. The fire places/hearths groups also do not have special brands to distinguish their cattle like the different clans have. However, the young people have special songs and dances composed particularly for their fire place (*ekeno*). Fire among the Karimojong people is a symbol of life. Fire symbolizes life and light (*akica*) which shines to the people. Fire is used in the funeral of those who have died to show that, the dead person is a child of light and the dead person should continue with the same light when he/she is in the world of the ancestors (*atapapa*).

In ordinary life, the Karimojong use fire for cooking, warming themselves and purification. The Karimojong came in contact with fire in their early migration in the territory believed to be their cradle land around Lake Turkana. The Karimojong know how to kindle fire from ordinary sticks for their use. At sunset every household kindles fire in the hut/house (*akai*) and in a place preserved for men (*aperit*) as a symbol of life and presence. This is done even if a person sleeps in that hut/house or not, but it is kindled to symbolize that, those people are present. At birth, the symbolism of fire is very instrumental, in that, all the fire used during these celebrations is considered sacred. Fire during marriage is also used to celebrate and bless the bride. Fire is also used in the customary celebration of killing the bull for wedding of the young sister, who has been wedded before the elder one, because this is forbidden, but since it happens, this act should be purified by killing an ox. The fire used in this celebration is considered sacred. During the wedding, the ceremony of smoking tobacco is performed. The man goes to the wife's home, smokes tobacco four times and fire is lit for this ceremony, this fire is sacred. However, this defers from clan to clan.

Immediately the woman experiences labour, fire is lit in the house, as a symbol of life in the name of the new expected child. This fire should never be extinguished and if it is extinguished, it will be considered a misfortune and it should be purified. It is not only fire used at birth that is considered sacred but all the fire that is used in the celebration of the new born child. This is how Bruno Novelli explains, 'the fire used during the celebrations is considered sacred, and only the grandmother may extinguish it at the end of the ceremony.'<sup>16</sup>The sacredness surrounding these celebrations is geared towards respect and protection of the life of the child and the mother, who are the future of the Karimojong community and humanity at large.

The centre of worship for the Karimojong community is a sacred place called *akiriket*. This is a place set apart for worship which should be in every village, sub-section or section of the Karimojong called *ekitela*. The main element used in this place of worship is fire for roasting and lighting. This is a place where the assembly of the elders gathers to pray to God. It is therefore a requirement for each village to have their own sacred place, where they will be praying to God. Bruno Novelli observed that "all neighbourhoods have their own ceremonial grounds for the requirements of the villages of that particular area, while sub-sections of the tribe, formed by a certain number of *ngitela* also have their own, which are used when needs of the entire sub-section or section warrant it."<sup>17</sup>

Fire in the Karimojong community is used in rituals, sacrifices, feasts and celebrations. Fire is used for roasting and burning of sacrificed animals and in the feasting of the community. In the Karimojong succession ceremony, the use of fire is of paramount importance, whereby the junior generation of elders handover power or the guidance of the Karimojong territory to the new generation of their sons, symbolized by the new fire. The senior elders are seen as old fire while the new fire is the new elders who are to take over the guidance of the Karimojong territory.

This symbolism is demonstrated in the action of extinguishing the fire in the whole of Karamoja and the new fire is kindled and brought from Apule/Nakadanya which is their sacred place where the ceremony of succession is celebrated; to the whole of Karamoja. Bruno Novelli explains that, part of the ceremony is:

the symbolism of the extinguishing all the fires in the tribal territory and in the kindling of the new one, from which all the other fires will be started anew. The old elders, the guarantors of life, retire. The fire, the symbol of life, which is being extinguished, signifies this. But life continues, because a new fire starts where the old one dies, i.e., the old elders have given rise to the new ones who will continue to guarantee life for the whole Karimojong people.<sup>18</sup>

This is the highest celebration of the symbolism of fire (*akim*) in the Karimojong community. The symbolism of fire as life is well demonstrated through extinguishing all the fires through the orders of the elders, this act makes all in the territory

<sup>13</sup> Anselm, Grün, *The Seven Sacraments*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Print, (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2009), P. 231

<sup>14</sup> Bruno, Novelli, P. LXXVII

<sup>15</sup> Augusto, Pazzaglia, P. 84

<sup>16</sup> Bruno, Novelli, p. 199

<sup>17</sup> Bruno, Novelli, P. 169

<sup>18</sup> Bruno, Novelli, P. 220

understand what has taken place, the new elders as the new fire have brought in new life and vigour to their community, while the old fire symbolizing the old elders have given rise to the new fire. The new life is always celebrated in the life of the Karimojong at birth of a child, rite of initiation of a teenager to adulthood and at death as a rite to being an ancestor.

### 3.1. The Birth of a Child

Before the birth of the child, fire is lit in the house and the mother is helped to deliver the child. This fire is to burn till the child and the mother leave the house with the ceremony of bringing the child out of the house. The symbolism of lighting the fire is to celebrate life, because fire symbolizes life. After some days the naming of the child is also celebrated and the child will be given a name during the naming ceremony. With enough fire in the house, for the following three or four days, the mother and the child remain in the house up to the sixth day. However, this practice is no longer done due to giving birth in the hospitals. What is important in this celebration is that, all the fire that is used for cooking and boiling water is considered sacred, in that, when using, the water should not drop on fire.

After this celebration, the grandmother puts off the fire used during the celebration; nobody is allowed to extinguish this fire except the grandmother (*Tata*). The ashes of this fire are thrown on the right side of the kraal. After the ceremony, the mother and the child will come back to the entrance of the house and joined by the grandmother who says these words: 'that you may live! That we may meet in good health! That we may become old! And the mother answers: yes, let it be!'<sup>19</sup> After words the grandmother goes back to her compound and the ceremony ends.

### 3.2. Rites of Initiation for Teenagers

This initiation ceremony is a celebration of life, which is a symbol of fire and in this case the celebration focus on the growth of the child. When a child grows up in the Karimojong community, he/she has to undergo the ceremony of initiation (*asapan*) for the boys and (*akiwor*) for the women. This ceremony is official way of introducing the son of an elder to the junior generation – set. The ceremony makes the boy become a man with all the rights and duties required of him. His identity will also affect his future wife, in that, if the man is called a mountain (*emoruoit*), his wife also will be called the mountain (*amoruoit*). If the man is called a gazelle (*egeteit*), the wife will also be called a gazelle (*ageteit*). The two names are a reflection of the two age – sets in the Karimojong community. This initiation gives the man the right to marry, take active part in the community assemblies, use all the implements which are symbols of their status like head dress (*etimat*), two-legged stool (*ekicolong*), wooden spoon (*abolokoc*), bracelets and ostrich feathers. The ceremony recognizes officially that, the child has learnt how to be a man, with all the duties and rights that this status brings.

### 3.3. Succession Ceremony (*Akidungamuro*)

The climax of growing up is to be handed over or given the responsibility of guiding the Karimojong community in the succession ceremony or *Akidungamuro* which is again the celebration of life. In this ceremony, the junior generation-set become senior generation-set. "This shifting of power from one generation to the following one, transforms the junior generation-set into the senior one, and allows the performance of all ceremonies proper to the elders and gives to their sons the possibility to be inducted into the new junior generation-set."<sup>20</sup> The ceremony is done in the *Akiriket* for the first time by the two generation-sets, the mountains (*ngimoru*) and the gazelles (*ngigetei*) the sons of the mountains. Their sons the gazelles, who have been the enforcers of order and policies of the Karimojong community before, have been made by this ceremony elders themselves, new legislators and guarantors of life to the whole community. The ceremony assures the way, integrity and continuation of the Karimojong political organization which guarantees their survival as a community. This celebration therefore, is one of the solemn moments in the Karimojong life, socially and more so religiously.

### 3.4. Death (*Atwanare*)

As we have discussed above, the senior generation of elders in the Karimojong community retire in the ceremony of the succession ceremony. This ceremony of succession refers to them as the old fire that has been extinguished. The junior elders, who are their sons, are referred to as the new fire being kindled to guide the whole Karimojong territory. Death among the Karimojong people is one of the rites of passage that one has to undergo, either at old age, accident or due to sickness. Dying at old age is considered a blessing and a sign of life well lived.

When such a person dies the people will say *eenguati* or *ekarati* meaning so and so has rested or he/she has died a natural death. Dying out of sickness or an accident is considered a misfortune and tragic. It is as if sickness or an accident has taken away or grabbed that person before time or unexpectedly of which if there was a possibility, it could be resisted. This is how Laurent Magesa explains this perception of death:

longevity is a prized aspect of life. In fact, it is seen as a consequence and proof of having lived morally. The death of a young person in battle is understood, but apart from such circumstances. The death of the young is inexplicable tragedy that points to moral disorder in the individual's life or society. On the contrary, death in old age is dignified event. It is expected that old people must demonstrate courage and heroism when faced with death. Such behaviour increases their honour and the influence of their vital force in the eyes of those they live behind.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Bruno, Novelli, P. 192

<sup>20</sup> Bruno, Novelli, P. 211

<sup>21</sup> Laurenti, Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), P. 144

In this case death is sometimes seen as honourable and dignified when one has died a natural death, leaving his/her family, relatives and friends in peace. This for the Karimojong people is a blessing to the family, clan and the whole Karimojong community. These are the people they will always seek the blessing from during their litanic prayer of *akigat*.

#### 4. Conclusion

The symbolism of fire in the Karimojong community therefore is life and this life is to be celebrated in the activities and the ceremonies that are performed every day of their life. This celebration is done at the birth of the child, that is why fire is immediately kindled when a child is born; and this fire should not be extinguished till the child grows up. The life of the child is also celebrated when he/she grows up through initiation, to affirm that, he/she has grown up to take the roles of the community. The celebration of the initiation ceremony comes to the climax at the succession ceremony; whereby the junior elders are entrusted with the authority to guide and protect the Karimojong community. The celebration of life is also reflected at the death of a person, whereby the community kindles the fire to accompany the deceased member of their community at this time of sorrow. Therefore, the symbolism of fire as life is very important in the Karimojong way of life and tradition.

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