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The Use of Fire in the Karimojong Traditional Worship (Akiriket)

Lowot Mark

Ph.D. Student, Department of Sacred Liturgy,
Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya

Abstract:

In this article "The use of fire in the Karimojong Traditional worship (Akiriket), I would like to discuss the use of fire as a main element in this worship. Karimojong traditional worship is performed in a sacred place called akiriket: which means a place of sacrifice, where the elders talk to God and ask Him for blessings and favours. The main element used in this worship is fire, this fire is used in preparing the banquet mainly of meat of the animal slaughtered. This animal slaughtered is used for sacrifice to appease, cleanse and purify the people and the whole community at large. In this celebration, God is invoked to bless various activities of the community.

Fire is also used in the celebration of different feasts: feasting the elders, driving cattle to the enclosure and at the succession ceremony.

Keywords: Worship, sacrifice, akiriket

1. Introduction

In the Karimojong community as a whole, there are ceremonial grounds designed for the worship of the supernatural and these grounds are called *Akiriket* or *Ngakiriketa* in plural. Some of these places are kraals or identified grounds under a certain tree. In these *ngakiriketa*, the main element used for worship is fire and the sacrifice cannot go ahead without fire. According to the dictionary of the Liturgy, fire is "a combination of flames, light, and heat, fire is closely allied with life. It is the most suitable symbol we have for the soul within that makes us live. Like fire, life is warm and radiant, never still, eager for the unreachable and fire is also a symbol of God."¹ Fire in this case is symbolizes God, the predominant use of fire by the Karimojong people in their sacrifice brings the presence of the divine element in their worship; which is fire. The use of this divine element shows the celebration of their life in God, because their life depends on God. In the celebration of their life in God the Karimojong bring warmth to their community. "Fire is the symbol of the Spirit and the ardour of Divine love."² In their celebration in the *akiriket*, the whole community is prayed for and God is invoked to bring love, harmony and peace to His children. Therefore, in the Karimojong community fire is very important in their worship and it is prominently used in the community's sacrifice. This is why John Lukwata says that "from time to time the village or clan members cleared the bush and offered bits of food to the ancestor or poured libations for the ancestors."³ Karamoja as a region is divided into ten (10) territorial subsections and each of these sections must have these ceremonial grounds or *ngakiriketa*, whereby the section prays to God.

In these sacred places (*ngakiriketa*) rituals are performed, the vegetation is left intact, things living in those places like serpents are not to be killed because they are considered sacred.

These places, in fact, are exclusively used for ritual celebrations and are linked with past generations, since it is there the fathers and forefathers of the present Karimojong used to convene for their religious – political activity. In each of these places are still existent the trees under which each past generation – set used to seat in a semi circle open towards Apule, the last locality, north of Moroto, where the ten sections of the Karimojong lived together before their present dispersal.⁴

In these sacred places or *ngakiriketa*, the whole of Karamoja as a region remind themselves of the link they have with their ancestors. Different kinds of gestures and praises are expressed in their honour and respect. "On top of the tree under which the elders sit, God himself is believed to descend in order to listen to their petitions during the historic prayer of the "akigat"⁵, with which the elders intercede with God on behalf of their people."⁶ The people come to pray to God for the gift of their place – Karamoja, their herd, children and they ask him to continue protecting them.

¹ Jovian, P. Lang, Dictionary of the Liturgy, (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Corp, 1989), P. 209

² Jovian, P. Lang, P. 209

³ John, Lukwata, Integrated African Liturgy, Revised Ed., (Limuru: AMECEA Gaba Publication- CUEA Press, 2011), P. 10

⁴ Bruno, Novelli, Karimojong Traditional Religion: A contribution, (Kampala: Bibliotheca Comboniana 4-al, 1999), P.58

⁵ This is a solemn Karimojong prayer which is always conducted in a litanic form, whereby the community response to the elder who leads the prayer on behalf of the community.

⁶ Bruno, Novelli, P. 58.

The most sacred of all places is certainly 'Nakadanya', on the slopes of Mt. Koteen, in Northern corner of Karimojong territory. There, the only ceremony at tribal level, is celebrated, that of succession ceremony (*akidungamuro*), which takes place when the senior generation –set, hands over power to the junior generation-set.⁷

This is a solemn celebration in the whole of Karamoja region, whereby the young generation witnesses the handover of power with intercession to God to guide them in handling and directing the issues of the whole tribe. In this sacred place, they have always to face to the east that is Apule area which is a place of their final dispersion which is in the eastern part of Karamoja. The cardinal point is believed to bring to them blessings and life.

For this reason, old people buried in the villages' kraal (which is to the east of the village), are placed facing east. During the mourning period for the death of a person, cattle are sent out to graze in the morning in an eastern direction, the direction where good things are coming from.⁸

In this belief that east brings blessings, the opposite is also true that the west brings misfortune and all bad things which are always associated with the west. Bruno Novelli observed that, the Karimojong facing to the east as a place where they came from brings out the perception that,

old customs and ways of life are considered by the Karimojong, as by every other people of being better than the present ones. This is the meaning of the latin '*laudatores temporis acti*'. In their minds this good life was when they were to the east of their present habitat, and by turning in that direction, they intend to appropriate for themselves the good things which were present there. The sun too rises from east and brings with it the life and the activity of the day, much more liked than that of the night.⁹

The Karimojong also belief that, the east wind brings them rain for their herds and their own crops. However, "the cosmic symbol of the rising sun expresses the universality of God above all particular places and yet maintains the concreteness of divine revelation. Our praying is thus inserted into the procession of the nations to God."¹⁰ The procession of the nations to their creator is the human recognition of God and seeing that human work or duty is to adore him and praise him for the wonders that he is doing everyday in the world. The following are some of the *ngakiriketa*, whereby fire is being used in worship in the Karimojong community. They comprise of feasting the elders (*akitocol*), cattle enclosure (*akiudakin*), and the succession ceremony (*Akidungamuro*).

2. Feasting the Elders

In the ceremony of feasting elders, the elders call down the blessings from God on the people, the fields and cattle, that God may bless them for the good of the people. This is how they invoke God, "may the people live! May the cattle live! May the grains be abundant!"¹¹ The feasting of the elders (*akitocol*) ceremony comes to an end after the litanic prayer of *akigat*, whereby the elders express to God the needs of the people and request God to bless them and their property. "The whole ceremony will end with special blessing pronounced by the elders of the three original clans, whose herds will be the first to move from the sacred place (*akiriket*) to return home."¹² At this time of the year also, the elders are encouraged to bless the hoes (*ngimelekes*) and seeds in preparation for digging and ploughing. The feasting of the elders is also done by an individual when one wants to seek blessings from the elders and this is called *Ekipeyos*.

2.1. Seeking for Blessing (*Ekipeyos*)

This ceremony is requested by a person who wants to seek blessings or to thank God for what He has done to him and his family; that person invites the elders to pray and intercede for him and his family. This can be an intercession for the problems besetting a particular person, family or village. These problems may be diseases or drought affecting both people and cattle. *Ekipeyos* comes from the verb *akipeyokin*, which means to slaughter an ox for a banquet or it is the prayer of the one seeking blessing that God may visit his home/family. After the slaughter of this animal, the elders begin the prayer and the family or the village of the person concern will be prayed over and blessed. After praying over the family, with the litanic prayer of *akigat*, the elders ask God to provide all the needs of this family or village. At the end of the prayer, the banquet begins, meat, milk and drinks are given to the congregation. The host at the end of the banquet expresses his happiness and gratitude in these words, "I am happy, God will help me."¹³ The congregation present responds to him that, "God has heard the prayers of the elders."¹⁴ After these prayers, the celebration is focused on the host with all his intentions. The next feast which takes place after such a celebration is the blessing of seeds and hoes in preparation for farming.

2.2. Blessing of Hoes/Plough (*Ngimelekes*) and Seeds (*Ngikinyom*)

This celebration is organized by the elders after the first rains in the month of February (*Lodunge*) or March (*Lomaruk*). During the ceremony, the people will be called out of the village; the women will be on one side, while the men on the other in a designated place, especially at the edge of the nearby field. In this celebration, the community invokes God to give and provide them with the precious gift of their daily needs which nourish their life, which is a symbol of fire;

⁷ Bruno, Novelli, P. 59.

⁸ Bruno, Novelli, P. 61.

⁹ Cf. Bruno, Novelli, P. 62.

¹⁰ Joseph, Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), P.76

¹¹ Augusto, Pazzaglia, *The Karimojong Some Aspects*, (Bologna: Museum Combonianum n. 37, 1982), P. 85

¹² Bruno, Novelli, P. 271

¹³ Augusto, Pazzaglia, P. 168

¹⁴ Augusto, Pazzaglia, P. 168

especially their food, cattle and land. The eldest of the elders blesses the hoes/plough, the seeds and the people present with water and black soil, by sprinkling in these words: "dig for the sorghum! That it may sprout, mature, open up! That the granaries may be filled to the brim, the people present answer each invocation: let it be."¹⁵ After the prayer, each one goes home to celebrate, but the following day, the women come to collect the hoes/ploughs and seeds and take them for ritual beginning of digging, each making four small circles on the ground called *ngipelui* in plural or *epelu* in singular. After this ritual digging, they will wait for two days, then the serious digging will take place.

2.3. Ceremony of Starting the Harvest (*AkimwaarNgimomwa*)

When the crops are ready, it is forbidden to go and collect some of them for eating before this ceremony of starting the harvest. This is how the ceremony is done, when the community sees that, the sorghum or maize is ready, the women of the area come together and set a date for this ceremony. On the appointed day, the women go to the field and collect small amount of sorghum, dry and grind it, prepare food (*atap*) mixed with cow peas (*emaret*), marrows/pumpkin (*ngakaidei*), roasted seeds of cucumbers (*ngikolil*) and ghee. This is all done using fire; food is distributed to those present and the women will pray to God in these words: "O God give us life, sorghum, cattle, let people be, let sorghum be, let joy for all be, allow all of us to exist on this earth!"¹⁶ After the ceremony, everybody will start harvesting their crops. The similar ceremony is also celebrated at the end of the harvest and it is called *akimwaarngimomwaor ngagwe*. These are celebrations of thanksgiving to God for granting the people their needs in this case agricultural products in abundance and plenty.

3. Driving Cattle to the Enclosure (*Akiudakin*)

At the beginning of the dry season, the Karimojong people call for the ceremony of obtaining permission and blessing from the elders for them to move their animals to the grazing grounds. "This ceremony is called '*akiudakinangaatuk*' (gathering of cattle into their enclosure – in order to be blessed by the elders)."¹⁷ The blessing of an elder is always sought for, by the community members of the junior generation. This is the celebration of thanksgiving to for the good harvest and blessing the cattle to go for the grazing grounds. The celebration is to thanks God for the harvest, pray against the diseases and draw down the blessing on the herds and the people. The community seeks blessings from the elders because the dry season is advancing, so it is necessary to ask for God's protection. Driving cattle to the enclosure "*(akiudakin)*"¹⁸ in the official designated places (*akero*) is mainly for blessing by the elders. This ceremony is official celebration for the elders to give permission for the departure of the herds and bless people who accompany them.

This ceremony is celebrated at section level, especially around September every year. Before this celebration, nobody is allowed to depart for pasture without the permission and prayers of the elders. The celebration culminates in the litanic prayer of *akigat*, whereby the prayer is focused on the safety and blessing of both people and herds. The celebration is characterized by "the large participation of members of the sections with their respective herds. The huruspication will focus on the problems which the dry season poses for cattle and people."¹⁹ The use of fire in this celebration is very important, because fire symbolizes the presence of the divine element, who is God. In the prayer of *akigat*, the prayer will focus on "God's special protection and blessing [...] Not only people will be blessed, but all the present herds also."²⁰ At this point the herds are then released from the enclosure, ready to go for grazing after the blessing. At this time generosity is encouraged in providing food and drinks for everyone who passes by.

3.1. Ritual Celebration of Praise Bull (*Atuuwa*)

When a praise bull is getting old, it will have to be slaughtered in a special way; the owner of the bull will have move around to identify the people with the same problem in order to celebrate together. After identifying, the date will be set with the permission of the elders for this celebration. The relatives, friends and the whole community will be invited for the banquet which will last for many days. The animals will be slaughtered ritually and the elders will bless the owners and their families.

4. Succession Ceremony (*AkidungAmuro*)

The climax of the use of fire is in this ceremony of succession ceremony, whereby, the old elders is understood as the fire which is being extinguished, while the new elders symbolize the fire which is being kindled. This is one of the ceremonies celebrated in a solemn manner, it is usually done when the members of the senior generation-set retire and then the new generation-set is inaugurated. This happens or takes place once or twice a century. This celebration is a pilgrimage whereby when people leave their homes certain kinds of behaviour are prohibited like "stealing, fighting, asking for repayment of debts, noisy behavior of any sort, are all explicitly forbidden from the time the home settlements are left behind until the travelers return again."²¹ In this ceremony, harmony among tribesmen is emphasized and peace

¹⁵ Cf. Bruno, Novelli, P. 287

¹⁶ Bruno, Novelli, P. 294

¹⁷ Bruno, Novelli, P. 69.

¹⁸ The driving of the animals to the enclosure is done in different places in each place or Ekitela. Among the Pian sub-section, the community gathers together at Arensesiep and Namerisia, for the Bokora sub-section they gather at Angaro while for the Matheniko, they celebrate this feast at Nabokat, Looyakaromwae, Nariogomong and Longolekiriwo. Among the Jie, the people gather at Daidai and Turuthung, and the Dodoth people gather at Zidok

¹⁹ Bruno, Novelli, P. 273

²⁰ Cf. Bruno, Novelli, P. 273

²¹ Bruno, Novelli, P. 68.

among them all. Some other ceremonies are also held every year especially in relation to the cycle of their pastoral and agricultural life.

This celebration is usually done at the time of good harvest and all people are expected to attend. This is the greatest celebration at the tribal level and this assembly at Apule/Nakadanya celebrates the transmission of power from the senior generation-set to junior generation-set. In the succession ceremony, fire is extinguished in the whole of Karamoja as a symbol of the old elders giving rise to the new fire, symbolizing the new elders.

4.1. Feast of Exorcising an Epidemic (*Egoro*)

In times of epidemics or Pandemics, the people in a surrounding area of a particular section are called to a designated area whereby an animal is cut into two and people pass in the middle of the two parts without looking back while going home. The people are made to gather in the western direction, so that, when passing through the two cut parts of an animal, the people go to the east direction; symbolizing that, they are going to the places of hope, goodness and blessing. A big fire is kindled in the place, but the fire is not used for burning or roasting the meat. In the evening of that day, few elders will come back to take the fire home, while the old fire at home is extinguished, this feast is called "*ekoro*."²² The symbolism is that, God has forgiven his people and they are going to start anew life. The people after this celebration begin their normal activities.

However, in the Karimojong tradition, there is time when sacrifices and social religious ceremonies are forbidden. This period of time is between the disappearance of the old moon and the reappearance of the new moon called *ngamutaekeelap*. *Amuta* in the Karimojong language means to ignore, to look away and to avert one's eyes for example. So "there are two nights without moon called '*ngamutae*', [...] it is during this period that feasts and sacrifices are forbidden."²³ At the time of the moon eclipse feasts and sacrifices are also not allowed or celebrated.

Though the use of fire is very important in the Karimojong traditional worship, it should also be noted that, fire has most often been used in destructive purposes. Fire has been used in destroying forests, burning homes in times of conflicts and for sabotage purposes. In the modern world today man has used fire to pollute the environment and at the same time, man has invented powerful dangerous weapons which ignite fire for destruction of the environment and the world. These weapons emit gases which pollute the environment, this is why the world today is crying of environmental pollution, which has brought a big problem of global warming.

5. Conclusion

The use of fire by the Karimojong people in their celebrations is very important and signifies the presence of God in their celebration. The *akiriket* is a sacred place for the Karimojong people, where the whole community goes to pray for each other and invoke God to protect them in their daily activities. The feasting of the elders helps the elders to realize and put into practice their duty of praying for the community. The same role is being seen in the ceremony of bringing the cattle to the enclosure to be blessed. The succession ceremony brings to the climax, the Karimojong celebration of their life, whereby the senior elders through their litanic prayer, entrust to God their children, the young elders; with the authority of guiding and protecting their community as they retire.

6. Reference

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- v. Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000

²² This feast among the Jie and the Dodoth is called Angola, while among the Tobur and Nyakwai it is called Angolet. It is only among the Bokora, Matheniko and the Pian that this feast is called Egoro.

²³ Bruno, Novelli, P. 70.