



Pre-Colonial History of the Kalenjin: Methodological Approaches

A multi-disciplinary seminar convened by Benjamin E. Kipkorirⁱ on behalf of Kipchumba Foundation on Wednesday 30 May 2012 at the Eldoret Club, Uasin Gishu County

Introduction

There is general consensus among scholarsⁱⁱ that a comprehensive pre-colonial history of the Kalenjin does not exist. In trying to construct such a history issues of methodology must be resolved. Several schools of thought on this may be adumbrated. One approach employs the use of linguistic equivalenceⁱⁱⁱ. A second espouses archeological evidence^{iv}. A third argues for the use of oral testimonies. With respect to this last approach, two distinctions can be discerned. One employs oral traditions in general to build a cumulative history of the respective people. In this perspective, we find the works of Beech^v, Chebet and Dietz^{vi}, Huntingford^{vii}, Goldschmidt^{viii}, Massam^{ix}, Mwanzi^x, Peristiany^{xi}, and Toweett^{xii} invaluable. The other perspective, which has not been considered so far, is a clan by clan historical survey, as suggested by Kipkorir and Welbourn^{xiii}. The proposed seminar is concerned with taking the Kipkorir/Welbourn proposal a stage further.

Kipkorir and Welbourn raised the question of the importance of oral traditions of the Kalenjin in building pre-colonial history of the people and in linking it with the beginning of colonial and post-colonial histories: "Oral traditions are, at the best, extremely difficult to build into tribal histories. It is much more likely that their variations will provide material for structural analysis of myths or highlight the inter-group tensions"^{xiv}. Two methods were suggested by the authors: (1) a

cumulative history of the so-called Kalenjin people, and (2) a clan by clan historical survey: "... two methods of collecting and utilizing the oral traditions and accounts must be employed. First, the whole Kalenjin people, including the Sirikwa...must be surveyed, historically. We suggest that in this exercise, the Maasai should be included... The second method tends to contradict the first...that only a nuclear approach in the first instance, i.e. a clan by clan historical survey, will make the greater objective and wider perspective possible."^{xv}

The two methods have their own limitations. The former raises the question of the classification of the Kalenjin people. They have been categorized by both colonial/foreign scholars and early Kalenjin elite as Keiyo (Elgeyo), Kipsigis, Marakwet, Nandi, Pokot (Suk), Sabao, Terik (Nyang'ori), and Tugen in Kenya, and the Tatoga in Tanzania. Others are the Dorobo who are remnants of Kalenjin speaking peoples among the Maasai and Kikuyu and reside in various forests such as Mau in Kenya. However, there is no certainty that other groups or remnants have *not* been left out. A clan by clan approach, while plausible, presents its challenges that include the starting and ending points. As Kipkorir^{xvi} has pointed out, identities are not permanent. Change of a cluster's clan identity, while not uncommon, would nevertheless not alter the value of its oral traditions in particular or respective clans in general. Quite often, it is assumed that a native Kalenjin scholar will ask the question "Whom am I?" If the response is Talaa (from Talai clan), then s/he will find out other clans that live side by side or that are mentioned in the Talai oral traditions. The authors have listed at least thirteen clans among the Marakwet, which should be of good use when getting started^{xvii}. In the ending point, the challenge is whether you arrive at the political term Kalenjin or you will follow the migration history of the Talai until you reach Europe following Misri (Egypt) legends^{xviii} or to any other part of the world.

However, there are still more challenges to arriving at pre-colonial history of the Kalenjin. The list of original narrators are diminished and, increasingly, there is likelihood of narrators confusing the oral histories with Biblical or other histories conceived with the increasing mobility and interaction of the people with the outside world through written, oral or virtual media. This calls for a systematic diachronic approach towards identifying the original frame of each text and in relying on comparative cross-examination of the authenticity of texts from different informants, which is an arduous task. In addition, Western scholars' approaches also pose their own challenges in that, though some acknowledge importance of oral traditions in building the oral history of the Kalenjin, they have tended to be "scientific". Thus they have not, to a larger extent, added to the Kalenjin intellectual horizon from their own perspectives.

Finally, the purpose of the seminar was to invite scholars and oral historians to make contributions on Kalenjin oral history by asking questions such as (1) who are Kalenjin?, (2) is it possible to construct pre-colonial history of the Kalenjin?, or (3) what are the most plausible methodological approaches to the study of pre-colonial history of the Kalenjin?

Output

The proceedings of the conference will be compiled, edited and published. Thereafter, a systematic study of the clan oral histories will be undertaken by encouraging students and other interested parties to pursue postgraduate studies in the areas identified for further study and following the most plausible, suggested methodologies.

Participants

The conference targeted a total of 30 participants in three categories: (1) presenters, (2) panelists, and (3) interested parties. The presenters presented papers/ oral texts, whereas the panelists who were seasoned scholars in their respective fields acted as moderators.

Notes

ⁱAmb. Dr Benjamin Edgar Kipkorir has done extensive researches on Kalenjin history, spanning five decades. He studied at Makerere University (BA) and University of Cambridge (UK) for PhD, which he completed in 1969, being the first Kalenjin to have received such qualifications at the time. Thereafter, he taught at the Department of History, University of Nairobi, for thirteen years, being the director of the Institute of African Studies for seven years. He is the author of several books on the history and social anthropology of the Kalenjin: *The Marakwet of Kenya* (1973, revised 2008), *Kerio Valley Past, Present and Future* (1983), *Descent from Cherang'any Hills* (2009), etc.

ⁱⁱ Kipkorir, B. E. and F. Welbourn. (1973, 2008). *The Marakwet of Kenya: A Preliminary Study*. Nairobi.

Moore, H. L. (1996). *Space, Text, and Gender: An Anthropological Study of the Marakwet*. UK: Cambridge University Press. pp17-18.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ehret, C. (1971). *Southern Nilotic History*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Sambu, K. A. (2007). *The Kalenjin Peoples Egypt Origin Legend Revisited: Was Isis Asiis? A Study in Comparative Religion*. Nairobi: Longhorn Publishers.

^{iv} Chebet, S. and Dietz, T. (2008). *Climbing the Cliff: History of the Keiyo*. Eldoret: Moi University Press.

^v Beech, M. W. H. (1911). *The Suk*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

^{vi} Sutton, J. E. G. (1976). The Kalenjin. *Kenya before 1900*. Ed. B. A. Ogot. Nairobi: East African Publishing House. pp 21-52.

^{vii} Huntingford, G. W. B. (1953). *The Nandi of Kenya*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

^{viii} Goldschmidt, W. (1976). *The Culture and Behaviour of the Sebei*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

^{ix} Massam, J. A. (1927). *The Cliff-Dwellers of Kenya*. London: Sampson & Co.

^x Mwanzi, H. A. (1977). *A History of the Kipsigiis*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.

^{xi} Peristiany, J. (1939). *The Social Institutions of the Kipsigiis*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

^{xii} Toweett, T. (1979). *Oral (Traditional) History of the Kipsigiis*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.

^{xiii} Kipkorir, B. E. and F. Welbourn. (1973, 2008). *The Marakwet of Kenya: A Preliminary Study*. Nairobi.

^{xiv} *ibid*; 2008 edition p. 67.

^{xv} *ibid*.

^{xvi} Kipkorir, B. E. (2009). *Descent from Cherang'any Hills: Memoirs of a Reluctant Academic*. Nairobi: Macmillan Publishers.

^{xvii} Kipkorir, B. E. and F. Welbourn. (1973, 2008). *The Marakwet of Kenya: A Preliminary Study*. Nairobi. pp 3-4.

^{xviii} Kipkorir, B. E. (1971). *The Kalenjin Phenomenon and the Misri Legends*. History Department Seminar Paper, University of Nairobi.