

# CLAN APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF THE PEOPLES OF EASTERN AFRICA OVER TIME: A CONCEPT PAPER<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

A people's history is an account of their past events. How did they evolve into the group to which they now belong? What informed their movements until they settled into their current territory? Who did they interact with in their sojourns/evolution and settlement? How were they organized politically, economically and socially? Answers to many of these questions constitute what anthropologists call culture.

Culture is a concept central to ethnology and archaeology, and can also be said to have been a major concern of physical anthropology. Although there are very many definitions of culture, we take the one by Ferraro and Andreatta (2012: 29) who have defined the concept as “everything that people have, think, and do as members of society”. This conceptualization is germane to the argument since people always *have*, *think*, and *do*. As observed by Ferraro and Andreatta, culture refers to things people carry in their heads such as ideas, values, and attitudes; and everything that people *do* refers to behaviour patterns. Thus all cultures are composed of material objects, ideas, values, and attitudes, and patterned ways of behaving”. Material objects consist of things that people use to exploit their physical as well as social environments such as tools and implements for economic pursuits or warfare. On the other hand, ideas, values and attitudes constitute a people's non-material things. Finally, behaviour patterns are behavioural conventions accepted by society. From this discussion, it can be seen that history and anthropology are related in many ways.

A clan is a group of people related by family. Both clan and family are important concepts in the study of a people's culture. This is because the family is the

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<sup>1</sup> This concept paper is a collaborative effort by several scholars. The idea for a clan approach to the history of the Kalenjin was first mooted by B E Kipkorir in his 1973 [p 81] work. More recently, a draft concept paper drawn up by him with Paul Kipchumba was discussed at a Ford Foundation funded multi-disciplinary seminar at the Eldoret Club, Eldoret, attended by scholars from Moi University and elsewhere, on Wednesday 30 May 2012. Subsequently Professor Simiyu Wandibba of the History Department of the University of Nairobi was roped in, and together with Kipkorir and Kipchumba, worked on the concept further leading to this draft, now concerned with not just the Kalenjin but the peoples of Eastern Africa, and from a multi-disciplinary perspective.

smallest socio-cultural and economic unit whilst the clan, in the traditional pre-modern setting determines and controls the day-to-day affairs of the family units which constitute that it.

Although in general history is seen as a reconstruction of the past based on evidence from and about the past, it is not just the study of everything from the past. In fact, historical research is significantly informed by the methods and hypotheses that historians bring to the material from the past (Baker, 1999). So, in reality history is the study of what “can be known ... (to the historian) ... through the surviving record” (Gottschalk, cited in Baker, 1999: 278). “The process of critically examining and analyzing the records and survivals of the past is ... called *historical method*” (*ibid.*).

Traditional historical work generally relies on written sources. These may be records, letters, diaries, and hand-written manuscripts, or printed books, pamphlets and periodicals (Baker, 1999: 278). However, most communities in Africa did not have any written records until the early missionaries and colonial administrators introduced literacy to them. This did not, however, mean that they had no histories. Their histories must therefore be reconstructed from oral accounts that have been passed on from generation to generation. These are narrated accounts, legends, myths, genealogies, songs, etc. These are called *oral* traditions – an important source of historical evidence.

## **The Problem**

The historians who have attempted the pre-colonial histories of East African communities (Ogot, 1967; Were, 1967; Muriuki 1974; Ochieng', 1974; Mwanzi, 1977) have essentially written what can be described as tribal *migration* histories. Their approach first identifies a community broadly and proceeds to trace its migration from wherever it came to its present abode. No serious attempt is made to disaggregate the community chosen into their basic constituents or components. In the case of the Abaluyia, for example, seventeen or so sub-ethnicities are treated as a single, homogeneous community. It is the broad sweep of humanity that put off one of the authors of this concept paper leading to his eschewing an attempt on a pre-colonial Kalenjin history (Kipkorir, 1973). Then he suggested the clan

approach, even as he lamented that the most of urgent steps must be taken to use such an approach.

When a people are said to migrate, who actually has done so - masses or families or groups of families? What triggers departure from one geographical domain to another? Clearly the answers to this are many including wars, natural calamities (drought, famine, epidemics, etc.) Except in recent colonial times, communities never move *en masse*; they do so as individuals or family units that can quickly transform into clans. Most of the names of the contemporary communities can be traced almost directly to the onset of colonial rule – being products of “divide and rule” policies. Clans, however, are a delineating nomenclature that is both ancient and constant. Also, whereas language, in its various dialects, can be shared by whole communities, even nations, the clan, represented by a totem, is unique to its members.

What do we understand by the term “clan”? A clan is either a patrilineal or matrilineal unit of a society. It may be divided into two or more exogamic sections distinguished by totems although some totems are shared by more than one clan. From a historical perspective, clans are unilineal descent groups, usually comprising more than ten generations, consisting of members who claim a common ancestry even though they cannot trace their exact connection back to that ancestor (Ferraro and Andreatta, 2012: 424). Clans are important to both historians and anthropologists. For example in Marakwet (Kalenjin) child-naming ceremonies, “the value of remembrance is tied up with having children and the continuity of the residential clan group. Children are not just the sons and daughters of particular individuals but the offspring and the future of the [clan] group itself.” (Henrietta L Moore 1996:62). Some clans cut across ethno linguistic boundaries suggesting extant relationships among such groups that are obviously different now. In any society may be found clans which are also distinguished by a craft or trade, e.g., black-smithing, pottery or healers, and diviners. Thus when a mass migration of a territorial community occurs, in the ensuing settlements will be found the specialist clans, but if not, trade with neighbouring communities ensues. If, for example, we assume that the ear-marking of livestock among livestock-holding communities is clan-based, it would be interesting to determine how many distinct markings there are and whether they cut across current ethno

linguistic boundaries or even vast territorial spans. Such a finding would significantly re-shape precolonial histories of communities.

We may safely assume that the language of a clan is likely to be more uniform than that of an ethnic community taken as a whole. If, as observed in our definition of the clan above the clans are components of ethnic communities and that they sometimes observe distinct rituals and or engage in trades and skills exclusively; and that they are linguistically more homogeneous than the “tribe”, then the clan approach substantially challenges the reliability of the tribal approach to the study of any people, let alone their history.

The clan is, therefore, the missing link in the study of the peoples of Eastern Africa. Hence our proposal. The advantage of this approach is that it eliminates the suppression of smaller communities by the larger ones. Good examples of such communities are the El Molo (subsumed under Turkana or Samburu), and Mukogodo (Samburu) and the Agiek/Ndorobo (Kalenjin/Maasai /Agikuyu).

## **Objectives**

The objective of the proposed approach is to study communities in a disaggregated manner that transcends territorial polities, using the smallest can units.

## **Methodology**

The project will be in two major phases:

### **Phase 1: Mapping out clans, their totems and their interconnections**

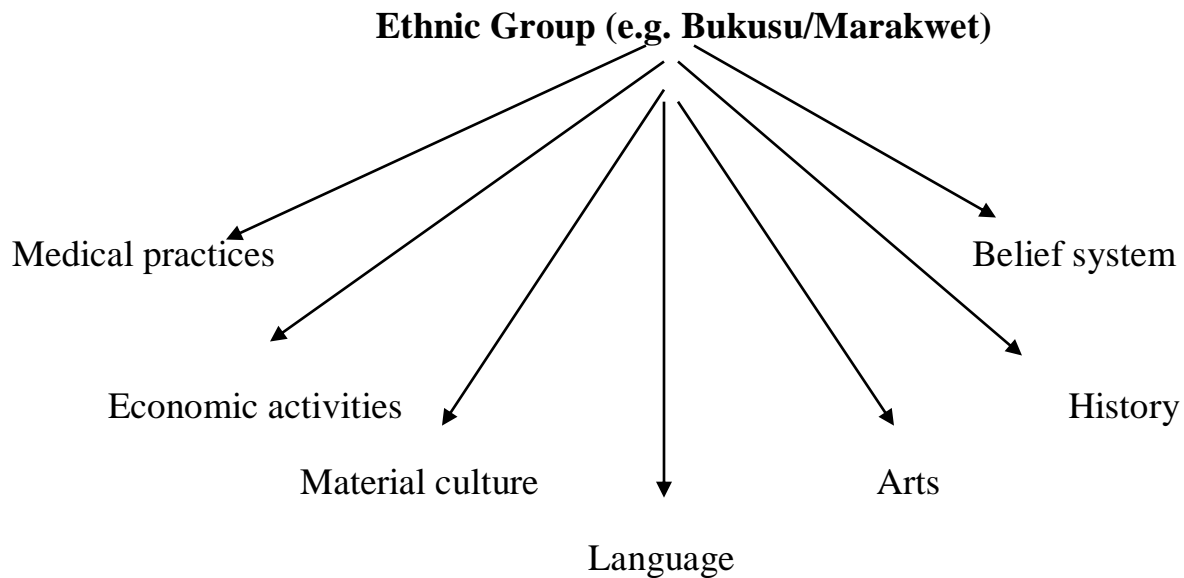
The approach requires that we should first ask these and related questions:

- i. How did clans come into being?
- ii. How were clan totems selected? To what extent is it possible to suggest that the physical environment of the first clans influenced their choice of totems when we know that some clans treat the moon and the sun as totems, and also that other terrestrial objects (“stars”) are likewise personified?
- iii. What distinguishes totems? Is there a hierarchy of totems?
- iv. Are there communities with different totems who think that they are related?
- v. Is marriage the main/only reason clans and totems exist?

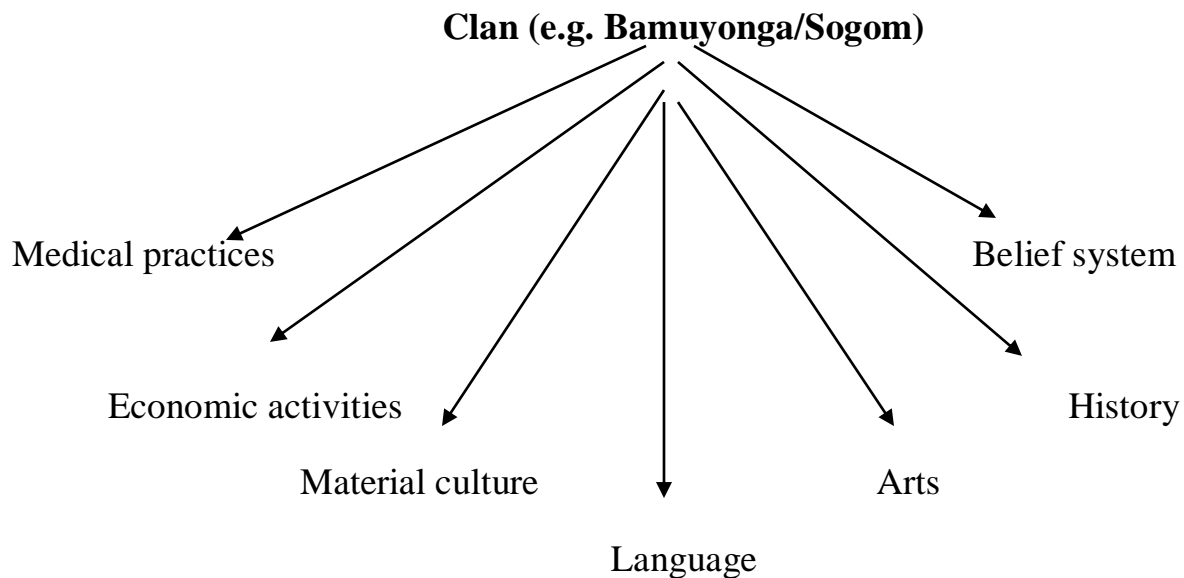
**Phase 2: Analysing different phenomena/** scholarly constructs with respect to clans; this will involve experts from different fields

The following diagrams were drawn to illustrate the distinction and complexities between clan and ethnic approaches to the study of a people:

**Fig. 1: Ethnic Approach**



**Fig. 2: Clan Approach**



**Note:** Studies on the peoples of Eastern Africa to today follow the ethnic model, as shown in Figure 1.

### **Phase 3 Cataloguing and synthesizing common themes arising from the approach**

This will be a cross-cultural study and will mainly use oral traditions to collect data. However, instead of focusing on “ethnic” or tribal histories, the study will focus on *clan* histories in their respective local settings bearing in mind that clans cut across territorial or political divides. Supplementary data will be collected from written documents. The research teams will consist of historians (including economic historians), anthropologists and linguists. Historians will examine documents on the history and traditions of the various peoples of Eastern Africa and then collect data on the clans that make up these peoples using oral traditions. Anthropologists will use ethnographic methods to collect data on the socio-cultural aspects of the various clans. Finally, linguists will examine the linguistic similarities and differences between the clans that make up the various communities.

### **Output**

The study expects to come up with detailed clan histories of the indigenous peoples of Eastern Africa. It is also expected that a number of students will be given opportunity to participate in the study for their graduate theses.

This is a major theme in the cultural studies of the peoples of Eastern Africa. It merits the financial and other forms of support from the governments of the Region as well as from the intuitions of higher learning. Properly undertaken, its findings should greatly enhance the values of the peoples as well as strengthening the common ties that actually brought the respective peoples to live in the Region.

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