

## **Apprehending *asapan*: archive overview**

This project documented material knowledge associated with the *asapan* ceremony of the Turkana of northern Kenya, which is a rite of passage undergone by Turkana men and comprises a critical transition into elderhood. *Asapan* continues to be undertaken in the present era and continues to be both socially and politically consequential. Whilst changes have clearly taken place within the materiality of *asapan* over the course of its long and complex history, a stronger and more important sense of continuity is often emphasised by elders today and is certainly underlined in many of the interviews and group discussions encompassed in this archive.

The archive is organised in a manner that reflects patterns of research and documentation that were, for over two years, pursued by a team of three: Lucas Lowasa, Ekidor Nami and Samuel Derbyshire, in a range of locations across southern Turkana. Over the course of the work, Samuel Derbyshire led the project and undertook both audio-visual and photographic documentation. Lucas Lowasa led interviewing and group discussion activities, broader community engagement, and undertook some photography. Ekidor Nami led photographic documentation. All team members lived and worked together in a highly collaborative manner; this archive is a result of their combined efforts.

Broadly speaking the archive is organised around 13 processes of construction, the assets that correspond to these processes are labelled C001 – C013 (the “C” standing for “crafting process”). Each of these processes comprises a series of audio-visual files and photographs (although a small number have only photographs, due to logistical limitations at the time of documentation). In each example, the construction process has been followed carefully and in its entirety, with documentation work usually beginning at the point when raw materials were being collected. Needless to say, without the patience and good humour of all the Turkana craftspeople who participated in this project, it would not have been possible. Living and working with these people for many months on end has left a very deep impression on all project members. The depth and complexity of material knowledge in Turkana is so fathomless as to be impossible to fully encompass in one lifetime, let alone a single two-year long project. Nevertheless, the team have endeavoured to do all research participants justice, and to represent their knowledge and skill as clearly as possible. Where possible, tree and plant species have been identified and included, in instances where this has not been possible to do with enough certainty, clear images of the trees are provided along with their names in the Turkana language.

Many of the objects captured in this archive grow less and less common with each passing year. Some are already completely out of use. Some of the objects are associated with the *asapan* ceremony in a direct sense, i.e., they are actually used in it. Others are more tangentially associated with the ceremony but nevertheless clearly implicated in its broader social performance and corollary ceremonial activities. This being said, the objects captured in this archive should not be envisaged purely as “*asapan* objects”, for they continue to be used in a wide range of everyday contexts across Turkana in the present day and indeed are domestic objects before they are anything else. They are very much practical objects, firmly associated with the pastoralist way of life. A large portion of rural Turkana households still have at least one spear, almost all rural households have a full inventory of milk, oil, and fat containers, including *ngakurumuo* (singular *akurum*), *ngilepito* (singular *elepito*), an *apangach*, *ngiburin* (singular *ebur*), and *ngatubwae* (singular *atubwa*). Most men carry a wooden stool/headrest called an *ekichielong* (which has a long and elaborate history of forms

and styles completely unrelated to changing resource availabilities). Cowhide shoes are now more or less completely out of use in the region, although continue to be constructed during *asapan* ceremonies, when the initiate reaches the home of their “*asapan* father” after the ritual feast. *Abarait* wrist knives are still worn by some, as are *abwo* and *adwel* skins, although nowadays the latter are usually worn only in ceremonial and celebratory contexts. The *akalach* belt is a recent innovation, imbibing a long history of belt wearing in different forms and styles, it is fabricated using materials that are produced entirely outside of Turkana.

Eight interviews and two focus group discussions are included in this archive, the assets associated with these are either labelled “I” for “Interview” or “G” for “Group discussion”. Many of the interviews are with craftspeople and were undertaken following an extended period of documentation covering a distinct object or batch of objects. Some are with elders who simply recount memories and knowledge of the changing social and material dimensions of life in Turkana, and *asapan* in particular. Of particular note is the interview with Lomoru Ima (I001) which is long and detailed, and covers topics so distant in the past that many contemporary elders have little knowledge or understanding of them. Of equal significance is the interview with Emeri Lowasa, during which she recounts her own experience of the *akinyonyo* ceremony in the 1960s. *Akinyonyo* is a ceremony undertaken by women at the point of marriage, that is, when they reach their marital home, and before their actual wedding. It involves the distribution of the new bride’s *ngakoroumwa* beads to the women of the man’s family, and a series of other activities, including the collection of firewood and water.

All interviews and group discussions are deposited as single audio-visual files with subtitles extracted from full translations embedded in them. The transcriptions and translations themselves are also included as pdfs associated with the main audio-visual file. This means that each interview or group discussion has at least three files (the movie file, and two text files), although some are also deposited with a small number of photographs, which were taken during the interview. Many of the interviews and both focus group discussions include discussions of historical photographic collections from the Pitt Rivers Museum and the British Museum. Where possible, the accession numbers of the individual photographs discussed in the interviews are included, some photographs taken recently of ethnographic object collections are also discussed.

Two ceremonial events are included in the archive, an *akinyonyo* ceremony (E001) and an *asapan* ceremony (E002).

All assets associated with a distinct event, the crafting of a distinct object, or a particular interview or focus group discussion are categorised accordingly. For example, all audio-visual materials and photographs associated with the crafting of a spear by Epodo Lobuin (C001) are associated within this subgroup (2019LG-02-C001-0001, 2019LG-02-C001-0002, 2019LG-02-C001-0003, and so on). Crucially, the numerical order of the assets within each subgroup corresponds with their temporal order, that is, the order in which they were recorded/photographed. This is important because due to the length and complexity of many of the construction processes documented it has not been appropriate to edit footage into single audio-visual files (encompassing, say, a month of activity). Instead, each *day* of work has its own single, edited, audio-visual file. This means that the construction of individual items always spans several different audio-visual files (several days of work), along with associated photographs.

Objects in the archive

**C001 (0001-0012)**

A spear constructed using an acacia root and animal hide sheath.

**C002 (0001-0266)**

*Akurum*, *elepiti* and *apangach* milk containers constructed in the Morusipo hill range.

**C003 (0001-0071)**

A contemporary style of *ekichielong* stool/headrest.

**C004 (0001-0073)**

A spear constructed with an *elim* tree branch and animal hide sheath.

**C005 (0001-0018)**

A pair of cowhide shoes.

**C006 (0001-0013)**

A cowhide sheath for a circular wrist knife.

**C007 (0001-0067)**

A spear made from *akaale* wood and animal hide sheath.

**C008 (0001-0075)**

An old form of *ekichielong* stool/headrest called an “*emakuk*,” now out of use.

**C009 (0001-0012)**

An *abwo* skin worn by married women being mended.

**C010 (0001-0029)**

An *akalach* decorative belt, worn at ceremonies.

**C011 (0001-0043)**

An old form of *ekichielong* stool/headrest referred to by some as an “*aporokocho*.”

**C012 (0001-0057)**

An *atubwa* bowl, an *ebur* oil/fat container and an *akaloboch* wooden spoon.

**C013 (0001-0083)**

*Abwo* and *adwel* skins, worn by married women.

Interviews and group discussions in the archive

**I001 (0001-0003)**

Interview with Lomoru Ima on his own experience of *asapan* and broader changes experienced throughout his life regarding objects, ornaments, and items of clothing.

**I002 (0001-0003)**

Interview with Eturi Eporon and other family members on *asapan*, material culture change, divination and a range of other issues.

**I003 (0001-0003)**

Interview with Emeri Lowasa, discussing her experience of *akinyonyo* in the 1960s.

**I004 (0001-0003)**

Interview with Epodo Lobuin and his wife Maria, discussing Turkana warfare, shields, spears, and a range of other topics.

**I005 (0001-0003)**

Interview with women in Morusipo discussing their recent construction of a variety of milk containers.

**I006 (0001-0003)**

Interview with Loura Ekaale exploring the construction of spears over history and the *asapan* ceremony.

**I007 (0001-0003)**

Interview with Silale Kuom discussing his ancestry (reaching back to the famous leader Lokerio), the *asapan* ceremony and his knowledge of carving *emakuk* stools in his earlier life.

**I008 (0001-0003)**

Interview with Esuruon Lomosia discussing his experience of changing stool/headrest forms, changing fashion and ornamentation, and *asapan*.

**G001 (0001-0007)**

Discussion with a large group of elders in Nakaalei, exploring the importance of *asapan*, patterns of change in material culture over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and other historical topics.

**G002 (0001-0011)**

Discussion with a group of men in Morusipo, exploring memories of *asapan* in the past and a range of other key topics, including old forms of *ekichielong* stool/headrest and head ornamentation.

*Events in the archive*

**E001 (0001-0010)**

An *akinyonyo* ceremony that took place near to Nadoto in January 2021.

**E002 (0001-0036)**

An *asapan* ceremony that took place near Kerio in February 2021.

**Brief overview of the *asapan* ceremony**

The *asapan* ceremony serves to formalise a man's passage from adolescence to adulthood. It has taken place in Turkana since well beyond living memory. To give further context to many of the interviews, group discussions, and crafting processes captured in this archive, below is a short overview of *asapan* in its key constituent parts.

Asapan does not take place in a single location, drawing together all Turkana initiates to be initiated in one go (as is the case with initiation ceremonies in many other neighbouring pastoralist groups). Instead, it is a small-scale event, bringing together a band of initiates from one particular location or homestead (they are often brothers or relatives). It takes place as and when necessary, at numerous different locations all across the region, always at a tree known to the particular local community at hand. This loose and fluid spatio-temporal structure to *asapan* reflects the fact that there is no formal age-set system in Turkana, and likely never has been. Past generations and broader histories of events tend not to be conceived of on a region-wide, unitary scale but are rather specific to individual locations and smaller social groupings. There are two generation sets, the *ngimor* (mountains, singular *emorut*) and the *ngirisae* (leopards, singular *erisait*). A man will enter the set that opposes his father's (i.e., if his father is an *emorut* he will be an *erisait*, and vice versa). In this regard, adult men are broadly divided into two sets, a division which manifests itself at formal occasions that entail a ritual feast (*akiriket*), during which the men present will divide into their respective groups and arrange themselves in order of seniority, forming the shape of a crescent.

When a young man is ready to undertake *asapan*, an elder from his area will put him forward for it, standing as his "sponsor" or "*asapan* father". This man will be responsible for guiding the initiate through the ceremony and then leading him back to his home, where the initiate will stay for four nights afterwards. On the main day of the ceremony, the initiates arrive, dance the *akimwomwor* dance, and are then led to a tree, where they are induced to sit down together with their legs outstretched in front of them. A range of containers of milk and oil are brought forth by other participants, along with offerings of tobacco for the elders present. One by one the initiates are then pulled up to their feet by their respective sponsors and led to the chief elder present (the oldest), who hands them his spear, blesses it, and them, and tells them to kill a goat with it. The initiate kills the goat (which he himself has brought) in one action. He is then led back to the tree, his shoes are removed, his *ekichielong* stool/headrest is placed beside him, and his hat and feathers are removed and placed on the ground. He and his colleagues sit silently while an *akiriket* feast begins to be prepared for the elders present, who form a crescent in front of them, with their backs toward them. It is important for the initiates to sit silently and still throughout the ceremony.

Eventually, one by one the initiates are raised to their feet again and brought forth to receive further blessings. The contents of the animals' stomachs are now spread upon each initiate's head, chest, and arms. They are then led back to the tree to sit again, with their legs outstretched in front of them. Pieces of stomach and internal organs are brought to them by their sponsors, they are told to bite from them and spit pieces down onto their chests. Then they are given pieces to eat. A bone is brought forth, and the initiates' hands are taken and guided toward breaking the bone with a stone to access the marrow inside it. At all times, the initiates act only passively, with their sponsors moving their hands and bodies for them. Meanwhile, the elders present sit in the *akiriket* formation and eat together, mixing large quantities of blood, milk, and oil together in a large container (historically a wooden *atubwa* bowl, but nowadays more commonly a *sufuria* aluminium pot).

Eventually, when the *akiriket* feast is well underway, the initiates are raised to their feet by their sponsors again and led away. The elders who are feasting do not turn their backs to look at them as they go. As the initiates leave, their sponsors pick up a palm seed or stone and toss it, telling them to throw their staff after it, in imitation of a game played by children. On the

way home, initiates converse with their sponsors as though they know little about the world around them, saying such things as “this is a tree, here?” or “what is this thing that flies, a bird?”

On arriving at the home of their sponsor, the initiate sits down on a cowskin (*ejemu*). Their clothes, ornaments (including *ngakoroumwa* beads worn specially for the event), headgear, and carried objects (such as *abarait* wrist knives and *ekichielong* stools/headrests) are removed and taken. They are dressed in rags or nothing. Their hair is shaved back an inch or so using a blade. White clay (*emunyen*) is applied to their head, and a small ornament made from camel tendons is applied to the back of their head. A new pair of cowhide shoes is made for them, which they will wear for the coming days. After four days, they will leave their sponsor’s home and return to their own home, at which point their mother will usually bless them and the homestead with water in an *elepiti* container. Gifts are then exchanged between the *asapan* father and the family of the initiate. It is only after undertaking *asapan* that a man is able to hold a position of any social standing, and indeed get married in a formal wedding ceremony.

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