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*Plate 9* View of Kakamat Compound. Left to right – all weather house, roofless sleeping hut, day house, work area showing central hearth and store at end of enclosure. The stock corral is not shown. Scale: Man in front of the day house is 6 ft 5 in. tall



*Plate 10* Interior view of all-weather house showing examples of containers on wall. Uppermost is used for storing ostrich feathers and tobacco etc., and is made of wood, with skin lid and base. Lowermost is made primarily from skin and is used for storing fat. That on the far right is also used for fat, and is made from wood set in a skin sling. Photos by Peter Jaffe

# Turkana material culture viewed from an archaeological perspective

L. H. Robbins

In recent years archaeologists have debated about the use of ethnographic information for archaeological interpretation (Hill 1968: 138–40; Gould 1971: 143). Yet archaeologists are uniformly frustrated when they turn to the ethnographic literature because most of the reports do not approach the subject of material culture from the spatial dimensions most appropriate for primary archaeological site analysis. The reports seldom, if ever, tell us (1) the number of individual items present in a specific inhabited settlement or dwelling area, (2) the distribution of items according to specific human activity areas, (3) percentages of kinds of raw materials used by the inhabitants for their artefacts, and (4) what happens to the contents of the residence when it is abandoned. Instead of providing such detailed quantitative information, traditional ethnographic reports generalize about the material culture of an entire society. While these broad pictures best suit the research needs of ethnographers, they do not provide archaeologists with much systematic information that is useful.

In this paper I attempt to examine the material culture of the Turkana from an archaeological perspective, i.e. in terms of the four points listed above. The Turkana are pastoralists who inhabit the desert and semi-desert landscape west of Lake Rudolf in northern Kenya (Gulliver 1955). They are especially suitable for ethno-archaeological studies because their material culture is still traditional, in the sense that most household utensils are made from local raw materials and have not been influenced much by contact. Neither has the nature of settlements and house construction changed substantially from what it was in 1888, when Teleki and von Höhnelt first visited the area (von Höhnelt 1894). Although the Turkana style of pastoralism represents a very ancient mode of adaptation, almost no other ethno-archaeological work has been published on them or any of the other classic East African pastoral tribes.

We began this study with an inventory of all the artefacts found within a specific compound of a single family homestead (*awi*). At the time of the study the *awi* was inhabited by a middle-aged man, his three wives, young children and an older unmarried daughter. These people lived at the locality of Kakamat, within a mile of the Lomenyangkuparat River in central Turkana District, about 35 miles from the District headquarters at Lodwar. There were at least four other homesteads within a two-square-mile area, all drawing water from the same series of wells in the normally dry river bed. Other clusters of homesteads were situated further along the river, and relatively few were found considerable distances from the river drainage. The homesteads are reported to be built by the women, although men may assist in gathering the necessary materials, which are

available in most areas. Individual huts are constructed by lashing together a wooden frame and by covering the frame with branches and palm leaves. Each wife constructs her own compound. The senior wife's compound, which is the one studied in this paper, consisted of a day hut, a roofless sleeping area, a bad weather hut, a general work and cooking area and a livestock enclosure. As can be seen in plate 9, the compound is suggestive of many small prehistoric sites in terms of its size and general layout.

### Contents of the compound

A complete material culture item analysis listing the Turkana terms and use for each object is on file at the National Museum of Kenya and the Smithsonian Institution, along with representative artefacts. The data pertinent to our discussion are summarized in tables 3-4 below and are classified according to the functional interpretation kindly given by the head of the homestead. For convenience, I have grouped the items into categories analagous to archaeological descriptive units. The infrequent multipurpose artefacts are grouped according to their dominant functions. A spear, for example, is used for cutting and woodworking, but it is primarily a weapon.

TABLE 3  
*Material culture item analysis, by areas (N=71)*

	Containers 47·8%	Primary tools 7·2%	Weapons 9·8%	Food prep. tools 15·4%	Clothing 7·2%	Miscel. 12·6%	% of items
AREAS	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Day house	9	0	1	3	2	1	22·5
Sleeping hut	1	1	0	2	0	1	7·0
Work area	5	4	2	3	0	2	22·5
Bad weather hut	19	0	4	1	3	5	45·1
Stock kraal	0	0	0	2	0	0	2·8

*Explanation:*

1. Primary tools (adze, chisel, awl etc.) are used to manufacture other items of Material Culture.
2. Miscellaneous items include a doll, dance stick, flute, stool etc.

Table 3 summarizes the distribution of the items according to areas within the compound. As can be seen, the bad weather house contains nearly one-half of the objects (plate 10). It is characterized by a high frequency of containers and is unique in the presence of three special fat containers (*akgitum*) made from skin. The day house is next in the frequency of containers, including two of the three metal vessels. The typical long Turkana spear is kept here. In contrast, very little is found in the sleeping hut. The work and kitchen area contains most of the primary tools (implements used to manufacture other tools), which are housed in a brushwood structure (*ekero*), as well as the only pottery found in the compound. Today, Turkana pottery has largely been replaced by purchased metal pans.

Turkana hearths and fire pits may be found in the kitchen area, in the sleeping hut,

outside the corral (for protection of the stock from predators), and outside the entire homestead (for driving away mosquitoes).

TABLE 4  
*Material culture items, by raw material (N=71)*

	Containers	Primary tools	Weapons	Food prep. tools	Clothing	Miscel.	% of items
Wood	7	0	5	6	0	2	28
Wood and skin	11	0	0	0	0	1	17
Wood and bone	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Wood and beads	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Plant fibre	1	0	0	0	0	1	3
Palm nut and beads	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Muscle	0	0	0	1	0	1	3
Skin	7	0	0	0	1	0	11
Skin and beads	0	0	0	0	4	0	6
Horn	1	0	0	0	0	1	3
Clay	2	0	0	0	0	0	3
Stone	0	1	0	1	0	0	3
Metal	3	1	1	0	0	0	7
Metal and wood	0	3	1	2	0	0	9
Glass	2	0	0	0	0	0	3
Paper	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
N	34	5	7	11	5	9	100%

*Comments:*

1. Most of the wood and skin items are primarily wood. The skin is used for lids, slings, and straps on many of the containers.
2. All glass, two of the metal containers and the paper item (postcard) were derived from our camp over a 2-month period.

The information we collected indicates that nearly one half of what is found in the compound consists of containers, for which there are at least sixteen different terms, while tools and weapons account for 32% of the objects. Whereas in the literature (Huntingford 1968), the Turkana and related paranilote, or Nilo-Hamitic, groups are sometimes characterized by type artefacts such as the distinctive spear, shield, stool-headrest, and circular wrist knife, these items comprise only 4% of our inventory. Thus, many of the so-called distinctive artefacts analagous to fossil directors in archaeology are not really numerically significant when the total material culture is studied. The kinds of artefacts found in the Kakamat compound are typical for the central and southern Turkana area and very likely characterize northern Turkana as well. I have seen the same items in households along the lower Turkwel River valley near Lake Rudolf and as far south-west as Kaputir, not far from the West Pokot District boundary.

It is striking that 63% of the items in the compound consist of what archaeologists would call perishable materials (table 4). This percentage escalates to 82% if we include the objects made from a combination of perishable and non-perishable materials. What are the implications of these data for archaeology? We could postulate that if conditions

of preservation and deposition remain similar to present conditions in central Turkana, archaeologists of the year A.D. 2500 would be extremely fortunate to excavate 25% of the material remains from this homestead. Little if any evidence of the most frequent objects, the wooden and skin containers, would be recovered from the compound at Kakamat. In addition it is unlikely that the remnants of material culture would be found in a true primary associational context. The items which now hang neatly on the walls of the huts would be scattered as the walls collapse and decay. In fact, much less than the postulated 25% of the material objects that might be preserved would be recovered in a future archaeological context. This is because the people take with them everything that is useful when they move to seek better browsing and grazing. Normally, all of the unbroken belongings are packed on donkeys or are carried to the next home site, and the old homestead is abandoned. It will be most interesting to see what is left in the Kakamat compound during my next visit to Turkana.

### **Progressive deterioration**

In many places, it is possible to find a series of settlements in various stages of deterioration, reflecting the periodic reuse of the land. We very briefly investigated three such homesteads located about 8 miles west of Lodwar in central Turkana. The most recent homestead, probably consisting of five compounds, appeared to have been abandoned about a month or so. There were five large structures about 12 m. in diameter and five smaller ones adjacent to them, as well as four distinct stock enclosures. In some cases, the typical three stones of the cooking hearths were present. These hearths contained, and were surrounded by, animal bones, a subject of future study along with soil changes. Interestingly enough, Late Stone Age flaking debris was liberally scattered about the surface, demonstrating the possibility that Stone Age debris could become incorporated with modern artefacts in a future archaeological context and in the same soil horizon.

Elsewhere, the following sparse remains were noted: (1) several pieces of broken glass, possibly utilized (I have seen Turkana casually use glass to scrape wood), (2) a few plastic beads, (3) several pieces of broken ostrich eggshells (although found on many prehistoric sites, ostrich eggshell beads are still worn by Turkana women today), (4) one metal, bottomless basin, (5) one broken wooden milk container (*Angrum*), (6) one large broken wooden bowl, (7) two small bowls: either toys or used for blood-letting, (8) cloth fragments, (9) miscellaneous metal fragments, and (10) a newspaper, presumably obtained in Lodwar.

This evidence confirms that most of what is left behind in an abandoned homestead is functionally useless and that only a very poor representation of material culture remains after approximately one month. Although one could distinguish activity areas from the structures and cooking hearths, it would be difficult to do this solely on the basis of the artefacts. Very few artefacts were found in the entire abandoned homestead, in comparison to the single inhabited compound described at Kakamat. There were, for example, twenty-six perishable containers in the Kakamat compound, while only two broken containers were noted in the abandoned homestead. This is an 8% retention rate if we compare the entire abandoned homestead with the compound in regard to one of the

most important features of Turkana material culture. In the former, there were no tools or functional weapons, which together accounted for nearly a third of the inventory of the inhabited compound. Clearly many of the artefacts which would most directly reflect specific activities and human behavioural patterns are not present in the abandoned homestead.

The second abandoned homestead appeared to be about a year old, and the third one was still older in terms of its relative state of deterioration. In both of these homesteads, there were hearth scatters and animal bones, but no artefacts were visible. However, it is likely that subsurface excavations would reveal additional bones, hearth scatters, a few beads, broken glass and metal fragments. Such a poor representation of the Turkana culture could hardly be encouraging to the archaeologist of the future.

In the central Turkana desert, wind erosion and dune formation are taking place at a rapid rate. The strong winds blowing off Lake Rudolf are exposing archaeological sites in ancient lake sediments, while at the same time covering recently abandoned Turkana homesteads (Robbins 1972). The archaeologist can study the process of site formation first-hand in this unique setting while excavating the ancient sites.

East Africa holds great potential for ethno-archaeological research because of the juxtaposition of recently abandoned sites and inhabited dwellings which still conform to traditional patterns. More systematic investigations should be undertaken while the opportunity for collecting information still exists. Ideally, such detailed comparative studies would include not only inventories of material culture, but also analyses of soils and bone debris. These studies would be most significant in areas where the recent archaeological past can be linked to the present through use of oral traditions.

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## **Abstract**

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### **Turkana material culture viewed from an archaeological perspective**

While ethnographic accounts of material culture are important to the archaeologist, quantitative studies approached from the perspectives most appropriate for archaeological site analysis are rare. This paper introduces one such study and examines the material culture of the Turkana, a pastoral tribe of northern Kenya. The study is based on an inventory of the contents of an inhabited compound. It compares the contents of the inhabited dwelling with a series of abandoned settlements. Results indicate (1) 63% of the items in the inhabited compound were, in archaeological terms, perishable objects, (2) 48% of the entire material culture in the modern compound consisted of containers, (3) very little, if any, evidence of the artefacts present in the inventory would be found within a year after abandonment of the settlement.