THE AZANIAN CIVILIZATION AND MEGALITHIC CUSHITES REVISITED

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Northern Kenya east of Lake Turkana is famous for the spectacular Early Man fossil remains found by the National Museums of Kenya team, directed by Richard Leakey. Not so well known are the archaeological remains of the earliest pastoralists in East Africa, also found in northern Kenya. They have been referred to as 'Megalithic Cushites' or as the 'Azanian Civilization' by earlier writers, mainly because of their predilection for stone and earth construction. These early pastoralists have been charged with introducing irrigation, terraced cultivation, roads, circumcision, age-sets, iron-working, kingship and a host of other previously unknown practices to Eastern Africa, along with their cattle, sheep and goats. Some writers have even suggested that these Cushites or Azanians were the builders of the famous stone ruins of Zimbabwe. In this article I would like to review these theories from the past and compare them to the results of more recent research.

'The civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites'. This statement, first made by C.G. Seligman in 1930 in *The Races of Africa,* was a widely held belief in anthropological and historical circles and influenced academic and popular thought up to recent times. The evidence for these beliefs was drawn from observations of the present day customs of 'Hamitic' peoples and from the distributions of certain cultural and economic practices in Africa thought to have been of 'Hamitic' origin. The belief in the superiority of these pastoral Hamites also had something of a racist undertone, as the Hamites were said to belong to the same branch of mankind as the Caucasions. Thus it was concluded that what little civilization did exist in Africa was brought in by migrating pastoralists who were members of the white race, albeit a dark variety.

The cradleland of the Hamites was thought to be in Arabia, though one authority suggested the Horn of Africa. After entering Africa, the Hamites began to split up. The Eastern Hamites became the present day Beja, Danakil, Galla (Oromo), Somali, most Ethiopians, and the ancient Egyptians. The Northern Hamites are today the Berbers, Tuareg, Tibu and Fulani of northern Africa, the Sahara and sahelian zone.

These Hamites were thought by Seligman to have entered Africa in waves of migration beginning as early as the end of the 'last pluvial', which by more recent research would be dated to 3000 or 4000 years ago. This idea has certain similarities with current archaeological thinking concerning the origins of pastoralism in East Africa, though the concept of a Hamitic racial type has been discarded. These early Hamites purportedly mixed with 'Negro' inhabitants in the region to produce 'Nilo-Hamites' and Negro-Hamitic populations. The former were represented by the Maasai, Kalenjin (Nandi, Kipsigis, Pokot), and the Teso group (Teso, Turkana, Karamajong and Toposa), while the latter included the Baganda and Humu of Uganda, the Kikuyu and the Chagga.

Huntingford in 1933 proposed the theory of an Azanian Civilization which existed in Kenya and northern Tanzania between the Stone Age and the Islamic Medieval period. These people were supposed to be Hamites who were forced south from Somalia and Ethiopia by Islamic invaders in the 8th century, finally to die out in Kenya and Tanzania around the 14th or 15th century. The remains attributed to these Azanians consisted of irrigation canals, terraced fields, graded roads, tumuli and cairns, hut circles, stone enclosures and deep wells. Their distribution is a bit patchy, being in parts of northern Kenya, the Western Highlands and Rift Valley of Kenya, and parts of northern Tanzania (Engaruka being the best example).

The term 'Azania' derives from the Greco-Roman *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (1st–2nd century A.D.) and Ptolemy's *Geography* (the part on East Africa from the 4th century A.D.). It was the name

Prehistoric phallic megaliths from southern Ethiopia.
From J.E. Jensen (1936), Im Lande des Gada, *Stuttgart.*

Islamic tombs with phallic pillar, Ishikani.

given to the East African coast as far south as Mozambique (it is thus a misnomer to apply it to South Africa). Some of the people living along the northern parts of this coast were described as being tall, bearded, long-haired and 'red' in colour, which fits in with an idea of caucasoid 'Hamites'. These people were pastoralists. Huntingford believed that it was such Hamitic pastoralists as described in the early Greco-Roman writings who descended into Kenya to create the structures we find today archaeologically.

In 1959 Murdock published an important book which synthesized the ideas of Seligman, Huntingford and others. He created the term Megalithic Cushites to refer to the pastoralists of the interior who built the monuments previously enumerated. He equates the Megalithic Cushites with a people from Njoro River Cave that L.S.B. Leakey called Neolithic Caucasoids (because their skulls did not look Negroid to him), which has been dated to 2920 years before the present. A prominent feature of these people was the use of volcanic stone vessels, and when many sites were found with this class of artefact the term Stone Bowl Cultures evolved. Evidence of pastoralism, the common use

of obsidian in stone tool manufacture and pottery-making (though of many diverse types) are broad features that the Stone Bowl sites share in common.

Murdock follows Huntingford and proposes the African Azanians who carried on the trade with the outside Arab, Persian, Indian and Chinese world were none other than the 'Megalithic Cushites who had descended the few miles from the Kenya highlands to the coast and there turned to maritime pursuits'. He supports this by stating that there are numerous megalithic remains along the Azanian coast, including stone phalli which are seen in Ethiopia amongst some Eastern Cushitic peoples. It is interesting to note that the movement pattern has been reversed by Murdock. He sees pastoralists going to the coast to become Azanians, while Huntingford saw Azanians fleeing the coast inland and south due to an Islamic influx.

Murdock further proposes that the Bantu and Islamic immigrants arriving along the coast sometime prior to A.D. 1000 absorbed the Cushitic Azanians, creating the urban Swahili civilization in the mixture of the three. The famous pillar tombs, some obviously phallic in shape, are thought to be a Cushitic influence on coastal Islamic architecture. This style of tomb is unique in the world; and Kirkman, the pioneer of Kenya coast archaeology, believes the pillar tombs to be the most interesting and sole architectural invention of the East African coast. The idea must have had indigenous roots.

The Megalithic Cushites who remained in the interior were believed by Murdock to have been absorbed by incoming Bantu farmers and Nilotic pastoralists, creating 'Hamitized Bantu' and 'Nilo-Hamites', following Seligman. Murdock draws up a list of distinctive Cushitic cultural traits and states that their distribution today amongst Bantu and Nilotic peoples is confined to areas formerly inhabited by the Megalithic Cushites. These traits are:

1. Age-grades of the peculiar cycling type characteristic of certain Eastern Cushites, or related forms.
2. The Cushitic taboo on the eating of fish.
3. The practice of drinking blood drawn from the necks of living animals by means of a miniature arrow.
4. The presence of despised and endogamous castes of smiths.
5. Circumcision for both sexes as contrasted with its absence, its restriction to one sex, or in the case of the Nilotes, with the extraction of the lower median incisors as as initiatory rite.

After reviewing the ethnographic record, Murdock comes to the conclusion that the best living example of the Megalithic Cushites are the Konso cluster, who live today in southern Ethiopia.

Murdock also discusses an earlier Cushitic immigration beginning about 5000 years ago from Ethiopia. These people spoke Southern Cushitic languages and initially were hunter-gatherers, the makers of Leakey's Kenya Capsian stone industry. They replaced Bushmanoid hunter-gatherers, who many early writers thought were the original inhabitants of all of southern and eastern Africa.

Up to the 1960s all of the important theories concerning population migrations in East Africa, such as those discussed above, were proposed by anthropologists using ethnographic, physiological and archaeological evidence. During the 1970s the linguists got into the act and a much more complicated picture of Cushitic and pastoral migrations emerged. The linguistic historical outlines are based on the use of lexico-statistics and glottochronology, methods that are controversial and not accepted by all linguists. The basic assumption of this method is that languages most similar to one another have a more recent common ancestral language, those most dissimilar (but still related) split longer ago in the past, and that the divergence of changing word forms takes place at an average rate through time. It is the assumption that all languages change at the same rate that bothers most people, but it is from this that times of language splits can be calculated. Word borrowings are also studied to ascertain culture contacts and influences. For example, if the Bantu languages in a prescribed area all share the same root for the word for 'cow', and that root is of Southern Cushitic origin, the assumption is made that those Bantu received both cattle and the word from Southern Cushites.

In spite of the methodological criticisms, these historical outlines provided by linguists have a great value to the archaeologist, as for the first time a chronology of specific linguistic groups exists which can be used to correlate with archaeological data. The methodology and theory of this approach is still only in its infancy, but I expect it to expand and develop.

The principal groups that concern early pastoralists in northern Kenya, the staging area for migrations to the east and south, are:[1]

1. Para-Southern Cushites between 5000 and 3000 b.p.
2. Yaakuans (Eastern Cushites) between a little earlier than 3000 b.p. and about 2500 b.p.

3. Baz (pre-Arbore, Dasenech, El Molo Eastern Cushites from about 2500 b.p. to 1500 b.p.
4. Proto-Southern Nilotes[2] (pre-Kalenjin) between 3000 and 2000 b.p.
5. Proto-Sam (pre-Somali, Rendille, Boni Eastern Cushites) around 2300 b.p. to——?
6. Rendille, formed some time between 1000 and 500 b.p.
7. Galla (Boran, Gabbra, Wardai) possibly as early as 1000 b.p., but definite expansion beginning by 500 b.p.
8. Eastern Nilotes (Maasai, Samburu, Turkana) to west of Lake Turkana beginning by 1500 b.p., to east of lake 200 b.p.

It becomes readily apparent that if even only half of these groups built stone structures and earthworks, the Megalithic Cushites are made up of more than one distinct people existing at widely divergent times. Archaeological research since the 1960s supports this view. I shall briefly summarize the results of three different research projects to demonstrate to the reader how complicated the situation has become.

During the 1960s Sutton conducted extensive archaeological research in the Western Highlands of Kenya, one of the core areas of the supposed Azanian or Megalithic civilization. He concluded that those involved in proposing the existence of these civilizations had made many errors of fact, exaggerations and dubious references. The terracing and irrigation works were less widespread and generally of lower quality than the earlier reports of Huntingford and others had suggested. Sutton found no evidence at all for 'graded roads', and no convincing monoliths or other megalithic monuments were found. Sutton concluded that the hut circles ('Sirikwa Holes') were built by Kalenjin (Southern Nilotic) peoples over the past few centuries and that the terracing located on the steep hillsides of Elgeyo Marakwet and the Cherangani Hills is also not more than a few centuries old. It is today done by Kalenjin speakers, but their own oral traditions and comparisons to the southern Ethiopia highlands support a view that earlier Cushitic speaking peoples introduced the concept. The common stone cairns in the area are still undated, but Sutton thinks them to belong to an earlier Cushitic people. The overall impression that one is left with is that both Southern Nilotic and Cushitic speaking peoples contributed to the archaeological remains of the Western Highlands. Until dates are obtained for the cairns and studies are made of the burials, there is no way of confirming the Cushitic hypothesis.

During the mid-1970s Robbins and Lynch carried out research to the north of the Western Highlands in the hot, arid lowlands west and southwest of Lake Turkana. Three of the many sites they investigated, called collectively Namoratunga, are made up of burial areas and associated rock art. The burials consist of vertical and horizontal stone slabs, and one site contained a series of stone pillars up to one metre in height aligned in rows. The presence of large quantities of cattle and caprine bones in the grave fill indicates that the people were pastoralists. Lynch and Robbins conclude that the people buried in the graves were Eastern Cushites. Their conclusion is based on the following evidence:

1. The burial customs and grave style are similar to those of the Eastern Cushitic Konso, and are not like those of the Nilotic Maasai, Turkana or Kalenjin.
2. The stone pillars are similar to those of wood or stone seen amongst other Eastern Cushitic peoples at funerary sites.
3. The pillars align themselves to the places on the horizon of the rising of seven stars around 300 B.C. These stars are currently used by certain Eastern Cushites to calculate their sophisticated twelve month year calendar. One C–14 date for the site was 2285 b.p., or 335 B.C., thus fitting the archaeo-astronomical data.
4. Ehret's historical linguistic work predicts the presence of Eastern Cushites in the area at that time (probably Baz).

Many other sites without stone structures contained a distinctive pottery type characterized by deep horizontal grooving. Robbins and Lynch have named this pottery style the Turkwell Tradition, after the river along which some of the sites are found. The Turkwell people appear to have practised a mixed economy of pastoralism and fishing. Turkwell sites have been C–14 dated from 1800 to 870 b.p. (150 to 1100 A.D.). These dates accord well with Ehret's prediction of the immigration of Eastern Nilotes (pre-Maasai and Turkana) into western Kenya from the Sudan and north-eastern Uganda. Here we have an explicit correlation of two archaeological 'cultures' with an historical linguistic outline.

In 1979 I began a research project on prehistoric and present pastoralists in northern Kenya around the Chalbi Desert. During the course of my research, which also includes ethno-archaeology, ethnography and environmental studies, I excavated ten stone cairn graves near Kalacha and four early pastoral sites in sand dunes near North Horr. The

results of the cairn excavations provide conclusive proof that more than one population were 'Megalithites'.

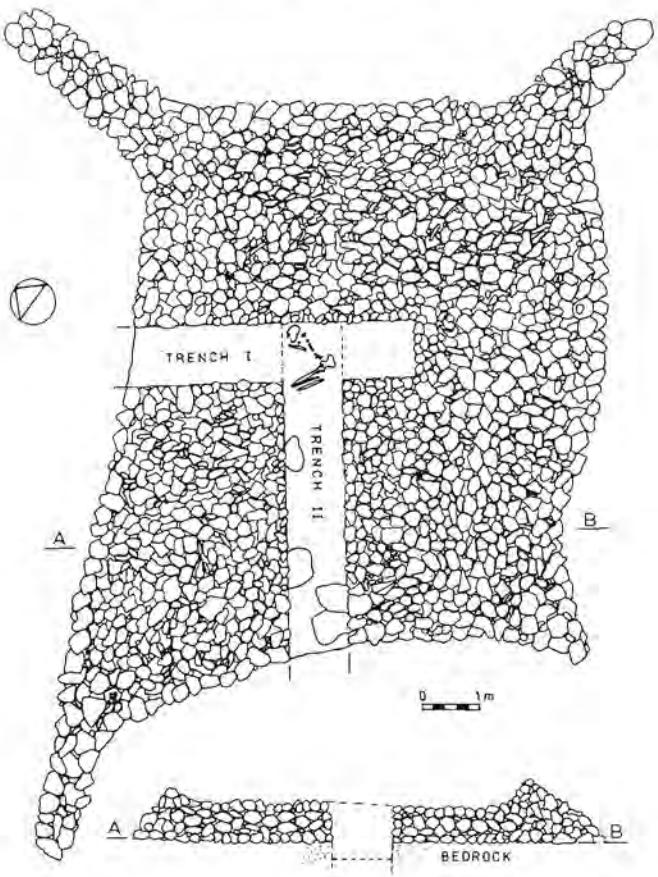
On and around Kokurmatakore Hill, located just half a kilometre east of Kalacha village, are found sixty-seven stone structures. The vast majority are simple mound cairns (55), ranging from two to ten metres in diameter, and there are nine rings (one a double ring), up to seventeen metres in diameter, and three squarish platform cairns. One of the mound cairns dates to 3460 b.p., the oldest known in East Africa, one platform dates to 960 b.p., and three rings date to 585, 510 and 125 b.p. (the error of the dates is about 120 years either way). I am hoping to obtain funds to date material that I have from one more mound, platform and ring.

The differences in age and cairn style are the first things that suggest the burials were made by different peoples. The antiquity and association of a stone vessel and obsidian artefacts with the mound cairn link it solidly with the early Pastoral Neolithic (Stone Bowl Culture), thought to be a Southern Cushitic phenomenon. The platform cairns, the only ones that I have seen or heard of anywhere in Kenya, could be very early Galla (Oromo) in origin. Similar styles have been seen in Galla occupied areas of Ethiopia and Somalia, but none of them have been excavated or dated. The ring cairns are the most intriguing.

When I first went to Kalacha and found the massive stone rings I thought that they might be a localized phenomenon, perhaps for the burials of community leaders. Since then I have travelled and conducted archaeological surveys over much of Marsabit District and I have come across hundreds of the large rings, invariably associated with mound cairns. They are almost always found in proximity to former or present water sources, such as along the margins of the Chalbi (a former lake), along river beds or near water holes. Centrally located inside of each ring is an oval-shaped concentration of small cobbles and pebbles which covers the grave. Usually there are also upright stone slabs or elongated cobbles at the head and/or foot of the central pebble concentration. Some of the stone concentrations also have the remains of a bush that was probably intentionally planted there at the time of burial, though they are now dried and dead. The most puzzling finding is the fact that of the four ring burials thus far excavated, all of them were missing from two to four lower incisors, a Nilotic trait. None of the mound platform burials were missing incisors.

Reading the archaeological and ethnographic

Plan of platform cairn from Kalacha.



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Above:
"Archaeo-astronomic" pillars from Namoratunga. They may be soddu *stones.*
Photo: Robert Soper.

Top Right:
Ring cairn from Kalacha.

Right:
Burial excavated from a ring cairn at Kalacha. The upper and lower middle incisors were misssing, suggesting Nilotic influence.

literature and carrying out interviews with local Gabbra and Rendille pastoralists have convinced me that the ring style of grave is Eastern Cushitic. The distribution of reported stone rings runs from Somalia, through Ethiopia, to northern Kenya (the furthest south I have seen one is just outside of Wamba, though small ones are reported to be on the Laikipia plateau). It is highly unlikely that any Nilotic speaking people ever occupied this range. The Gabbra and Rendille (both Eastern Cushitic) today build stone rings, though much smaller, as part of their funerary customs. A person (male or female) is first buried under a small cairn. After eight years a ceremony is held during which the cairn stones are made into a ring. Upright stones are placed to the east of the cairn, and eight years later

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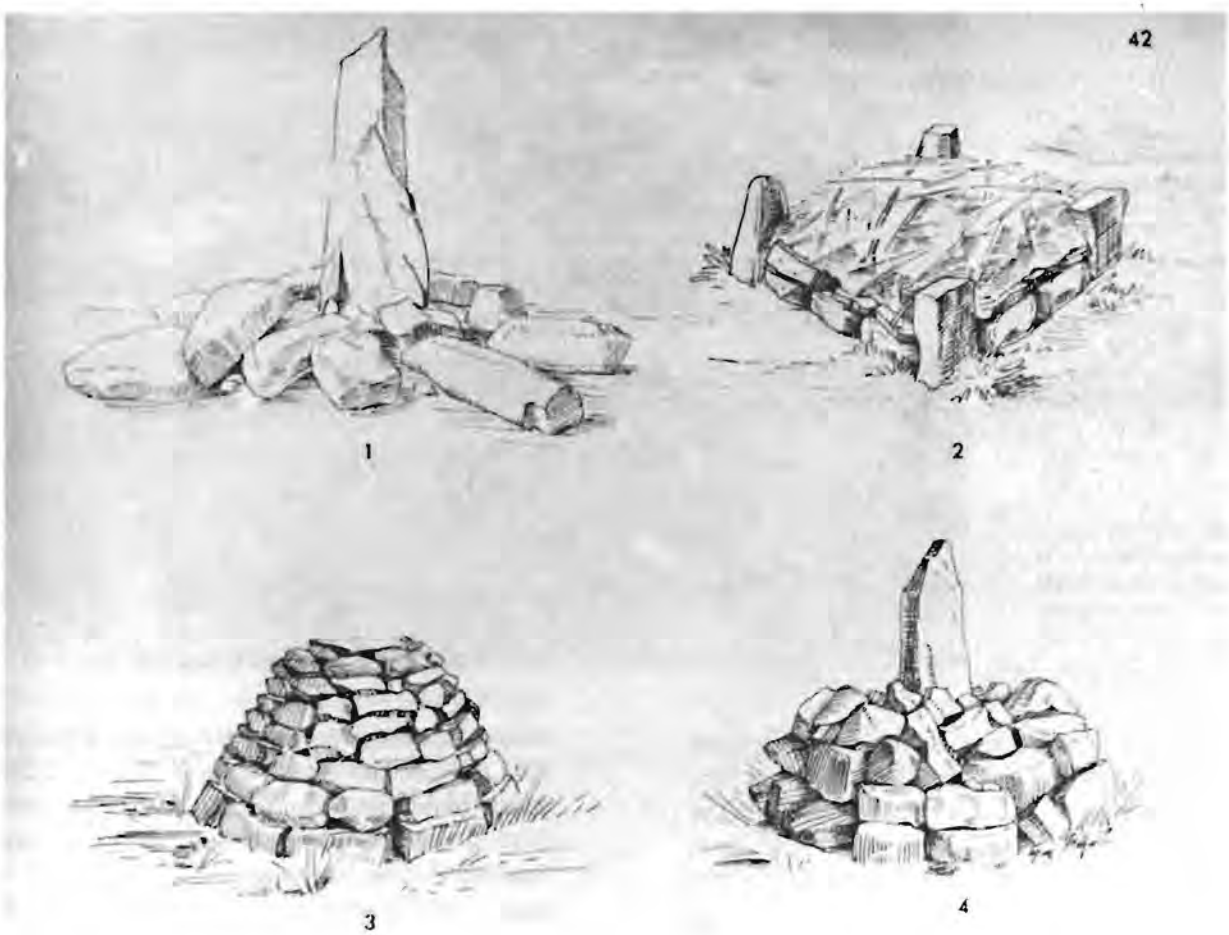
Soddu *stones from a ring cairn.*

the ring is made around them. Often a bush cutting is planted near the stones; if the person was generous it will take root. The stones are called *soddu* and indicate that the deceased had children. I believe that the upright stones seen in the prehistoric rings, and at Namoratunga, are *soddu*.[3] Because of the great size of the prehistoric rings, and certain features of construction, I do not think they were built from previous cairns, but there is nevertheless an obvious ethnographic parallel in form with present day Eastern Cushitic practice.

Neither the Gabbra, Boran, or Rendille whom I have interviewed claim any connection with the prehistoric graves (which is why I had no problem excavating them), and all the Gabbra or Boran can say is that they were made by a tall, cattle herding people called the Wardai who had migrated south before their arrival. These traditions belong to the Boran, originally of southern Ethiopia, and have accompanied them and the Gabbra to northern Kenya only in the 19th century. They refer to the cairn graves and ancient deep wells in the Boran and Gabbra homelands, and not necessarily to the cairns

Funerary monuments and a small square grave, reminiscent of the platform cairn, all from southern Ethiopia. From Haberland, et.al (1959), Altvolker Sud-Athiopians, *Stuttgart.*



in the Chalbi area where these Galla pastoralists have only so recently arrived. The Wardai Boran are ancestors of the present day Orma, who live along the Tana river and near the Kenya coast, and they have never practised incisor evulsion. The two Rendille that I have questioned say that they know nothing of the graves, but I think with more knowledgeable informants much more information could be obtained.

So what people are buried in the mysterious rings?

Given the evidence at hand, I think that the most reasonable hypothesis involves accepting a mixture of immigrant Eastern Cushites with local Southern Nilotes. The most likely Cushites are ancestral Rendille, the most probable Nilotes are ancestral Pokot. This does not mean that the ring makers were a mixture of present day Rendille and Pokot, but rather that whoever their respective ancestors were, these peoples interacted closely. My guess at the moment is that rings were built by Rendille speakers who had borrowed Nilotic customs, analogous to the Rendille-Samburu situation today. The present day Rendille and Pokot are certainly very different from their respective five hundred year old ancestors, due to normal culture change and to more recent cultural borrowings, the Rendille from the Samburu and the Pokot from the Turkana. I also think it possible that the ring cairn makers were the people who first introduced camels to the Chalbi area, but much more research is needed before any conclusions can be drawn. Most of the above discussion goes little beyond speculation, but it is from trying to explain current research results that future research goals are formulated.

Notes

1. This outline is based mainly on the work of Ehret and Heine, though there is not agreement between the two on certain particulars. Para-Southern Cushite means Southern Cushitic-related.
2. It is unlikely that proto-Southern Nilotes ever lived permanently east of Lake Turkana, but they may have made incursions.
3. The archaeo-astronomy of Namoratunga is probably the figment of a lively imagination. There were C-14 dates that Lynch discards because they do not fit the theory, and Soper has restudied the site and found that Lynch made many measurement errors of the pillar alignments. The pillars are Eastern Cushitic *soddu* associated with the adjacent burial cairns, not an African Stonehenge.

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