

Saving the Cultural Heritage of the Ik community in Kaabong District



2019

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About this Catalogue

Several writers, including journalists, have written about the Ik, but with little emphasis on their cultural heritage. This publication therefore provides an opportunity for the Ik to share their perspectives on the importance of their cultural heritage and identity.

Important but threatened cultural and natural heritage treasures of the Ik include their music and dance, traditional healing mechanisms

and ceremonies, cultural heritage sites and shrines, and artefacts such as traditional household utensils, farming and hunting implements.

This catalogue is also intended to profile the cultural values cherished by the Ik. It describes the Ik in section One, the cultural resources preserved at the Ik House of Memory in section Two, selected ceremonies and rituals in section Three and the cultural heritage sites in section Four.

The information contained in this publication was collected with the assistance of John Mark Lomeri, Paul Lotuk, Peter Lotyang Chila, Peter Lomogin, Rose Nongoli and Joseph Lemu, the custodians of the Ik House of Memory.

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1. Who are the Ik?

The Ik are one of Uganda's indigenous minority groups and forest dependent people. They live in the extreme North-East of Uganda, east of the Kidepo Valley National Park in Kamion, Timu and Morungole sub-counties, in the current Kaabong District. The total population of the Ik according to the 2014 national census is 14,000 (6,500 males and 7,500 females).

According to John Mark Lomeri (an Ik elder), the Ik are believed to have been the first settlers in what is now northern Karamoja, where they have lived for over four centuries, although the local history offers little clue as to when this group came to North Eastern Uganda and through which route. The Ik originally occupied the central Forest Reserves of Timu, Puta, Morungole, Zulia, and parts of the Park. They were evicted from the Park in 1962 when it was gazetted as a Protected Area. This disconnected the Ik from some of their cultural sites which they have not accessed until today. Currently, Ik settlements are found in Timu, Kamion and Morungole.

According to oral narratives, when hostile pastoral groups came and started occupying Ik settlements, the Ik were forced out of the plains onto the mountain. The Ik are



still today accustomed to living on the hill-tops or mountain ridges as a security measure against attacks from dominant neighbours, mostly the Dodoth in Uganda and the Turkana in Kenya. Because of this, different researchers and anthropologists named the Ik “The Mountain People”. With threats from livestock raiders, the Ik chose not to keep animals but have for the last 100 years or so engaged in subsistence agriculture. They mainly cultivate sorghum, finger millet and maize as staple crops and supplement these with pumpkins, beans and greens of various kinds. The food produced is sometimes shared with the neighbouring communities such as the Turkana and the Dodoth, with whom they have interacted for decades.

The Ik speak a language (*Kiik* in Kiswahili) which belongs to the Kuliak sub-group of Nilo-

Saharan languages. Although Ik is not taught in schools, children learn it as their mother tongue and typically remain monolingual up to six years. An Ik orthography has been developed but is yet to be fully embraced by the Ik community.

As is the case with other communities in Uganda, the Ik have a clan system. All Ik belong to 11 clans, although some are divided into two sections.

Marrying within one’s clan is prohibited. Should this happen, rituals are conducted to avert calamities such as children born with disabilities.

Traditionally, the male elders are responsible for leadership and governance among the Ik. Elderly women can however, contribute to discussions or decisions when invited. Men become elders because of their age and influence or ability to speak well in public. They are

responsible for determining taboos and punishments for wrong-doing.

The Ik are religious people. Until the advent of Christianity in Ik-land, they generally practiced a traditional religion which involved a sky-god called *Did-Gwari*, who is mostly associated with good or bad weather patterns and the effects they have on the Ik community’s survival. The Ik can appease or influence this god through prayers and sacrifices.

2. Cultural heritage items preserved at the Ik House of Memory



1. Bolokots (Jug for serving local beer from big pots)

This jug is used by the Ik as well as other ethnic groups in the Karamoja region, such as the Dodoth. It is carved in wood, circular in shape with a sisal handle on the side. Its carrying capacity is approximately 2 litres.

The jug is important among the Ik because it is used to serve local beer known as *Mes* (also known as *Kwete*) from a big pot.

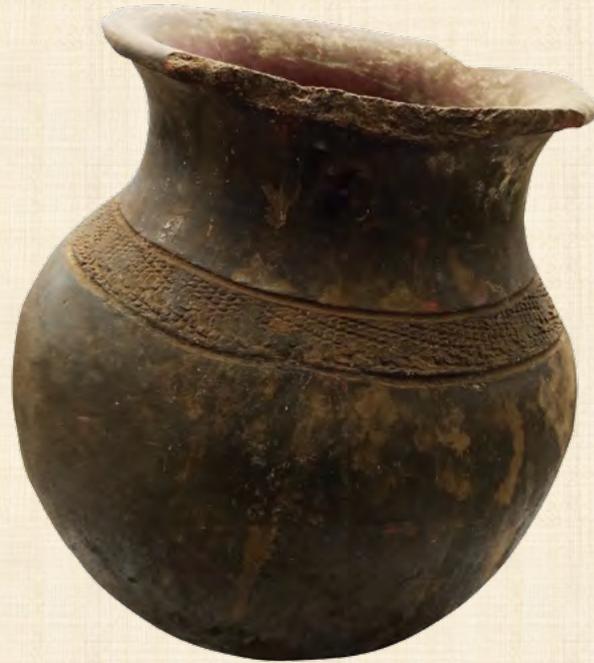
In the past, newly married women were not allowed to use this jug to serve beer from the pot as it was thought that this would lead to blindness and barrenness. They could however use the jug when assisted by an older woman, such as a mother-in-law.



2. Nyegulu (Cooking pot)

This cooking pot is made out of clay with a decorative design.

This type of pot is used to cook a variety of food such as beans, meat, vegetables, and maize grains. It is prohibited to invert and sit on this pot as it is believed that it may result in boils on the buttocks.



3. Nyebur (Honey/Ghee container)

The Nyebur is unique to the Ik and the Turkana of Kenya. It is wooden with its lower part covered with a cow's hide, with a woven hide handle at the side and an opening at the top.

The Ik were the main makers of this type of container and sold them to the Turkana. The Ik used the container for keeping honey and ghee which was used to smear calabashes to beautify them and smoothen hides to beautify them and smoothen hides for wear.

Larger containers of this type were used to serve honey to in-laws as part of dowry. A Nyebur mainly belonged to men. It was seen as a sign of disrespect to family heads if children and wives used it.



4. Lugunagiresi (Money purse)

This money purse is common among the Ik and the Dodoth. Its design is said to have originated from the Dodoth. It is made from a calabash with a zigzag cutting at the top and interlocking edges. It is in the form of a flower to give it beauty. The lid is held to the bottom part by a string and the designs are peculiar to Ik clans, for example, in this case, the Ilengiik clan.

This gourd was used to keep money (coins), seeds and feathers. It was only used by men. If a woman opened it, she would be branded a thief.



5. Kofo (Calabash bowl)

This calabash is used to mix water and herbs collected from the Jao plant whose mixture is used to bless a newly married woman. It is believed that, if this ritual is not performed, the married couple will not give birth to children.

After performing the ritual, the calabash and leaves are placed on the roof at the entrance of the woman's hut and remain there for 5 days. If removed by anyone before the 5 days elapse, a sheep must be slaughtered as a sacrifice.



6. Kor (Calabash)

This is a calabash with half a litre carrying capacity. It is used to serve porridge, vegetables, and other foodstuff such as cereals.

It is also used to take food to a shrine. The Kor used in the shrine is not supposed to be used for other activities performed outside it.



7. Logu (Big lid gourd)

This is a gourd with different designs (black decorations) each being particular to a clan. This design or colour pattern is unique to the Komukwa clan.

It has a handle at the top made of green sisal strings. The Logu is used for drinking mes (local beer). It is not supposed to be touched if it contains beer meant for the spirits in shrines. To notify people that the beer in the gourd is for the spirits, leaves of the Jaw tree are inserted in the gourd. It is forbidden to touch this gourd unless one is performing a ritual.



8. Bolo (Small gourd)

The colour patterns on this gourd are unique to the Ik. It is used for fetching water by children and to carry seeds for Itoweets, the Ik annual harvest festival.



9. Buluket (Gourd for treating stomach upsets)

This type of gourd is commonly used by the Ik. It is a small long-necked gourd with an opening at the top and another one around its 'belly.' While in other communities this gourd could be used to fetch water, among the Ik, it is used mainly for healing purposes, for instance, administering traditional medicine for treating tape worms and diarrhea.

Medicine is mixed with water through the opening on its 'belly'. It is then inserted into the rectum while observing the flow of the medicine into the lower intestine. This is used to wash away impurities from the rectum.

This gourd is kept away from other gourds for hygiene purposes at the fence of the homestead.



10. Kolo (Gourd paid as part of the dowry)

This gourd has a large round body with a short neck with black decorations to signify Ik beauty. It has a flat bottom for stability on the ground or when carried on the head.

This gourd was mainly used as part of dowry taken to a girl's parents by her suitor. It was also used to prepare and keep honey for sale and to fetch and keep water.



11. Yo (Honey bag)

This bag is unique to the Ik. It is made out of animal hide (cow and wild animals such as buffaloes, antelopes or bushbucks). It has a handle and holes at the top for tying it after collecting honey.

In the past, the bag was used for harvesting honey. It was sometimes used to carry bush meat, especially when someone failed to get honey. The small piece of wood tied to its handle is meant for good luck when going to harvest honey.



12. Nyerupepe (Horn)

The Nyerupepe is a curled horn with two openings, a small one in the middle and a larger one at the end. It is obtained from a male bushbuck

and blown during celebrations and performances, especially during the Itowees festival. It is also used for mobilising people or to alert them

when there is an enemy attack or when there is any other serious danger in the community.



13. Nyelepit (Milking Jug)

This jug is unique to the Ik and the Turkana of Kenya. Carved out of wood, the jug has a wide opening at the top to allow for the easy flow of milk. It has two small handles on the sides with a string to carry it.

The jug was used for milking cows and drinking milk among the Turkana. The Ik used to make this type of jug and to sell them to the Turkana who are cattle keepers.

It was especially used by men and it was not supposed to rest on the floor for fear of spilling the milk.



14. Dom (Earthen pot)

This pot was made out of clay with a conical and pointed bottom and a short neck.

It is used for brewing and keeping the local beer, *Mes* or *Kwete*. Beer is left in this pot to ferment before it is served. Sometimes, this pot is used to ferment honey beer known as *Sis*. It is also used to carry water or to boil white ants.

The pot is supposed to be kept in a corner inside the house where a hole is dug and the pot is placed in it to make it stable. Only elderly women are allowed to serve beer from this pot. If young persons attempt to do so, they are said to have run mad or to be cursed.



15. Nakut (wooden hoe)

This hoe is unique to the Ik. It is carved in wood (from the gur tree) and is about a metre in length. One part (at the bottom) is shaped as an oar. The Nakut was used for digging, planting maize and weeding millet, sorghum, and pumpkins.

It was also used for digging holes for the construction of huts or traditional fences around Ik homesteads. It is no longer in use due to the introduction of metal hoes.



16. Naabus (Hedgehog skin)

The skin of a hedgehog with white and brown spikes is used to stop bad omen from one's homestead. It is usually placed on the inside of the entrance of the hut.

The intestines of the hedgehog are used to heal stomach upsets. They are dried, ground and mixed with water and taken by the patient.

A hedgehog that enters the home on its own can never be eaten, as it is believed that when beaten or killed, someone in the family will die. It is also believed that when the hedgehog enters someone's hut, this is a bad omen for one of the members of that family.



17. Kanaxa (Beehive)

This type of bee-hive is made from a one-metre long tree trunk with openings at both ends, made from the mokol and gaja trees.

Its main use is to colonise bees to make honey, to be used for different purposes, such as medicine, food or dowry. In the past, a beehive was also used as part of the dowry.

The hives are mainly made by men and it is prohibited to harvest all the honey from the beehive as it is believed that this would chase away the bees.



18. Choorik (Jingle bells)

These are metallic bells with small metallic pebbles inside. They have a strap made out of animal hide to hold them together. The bells are used during traditional performances especially at the Dikwa dance which is performed during food harvests. The bells produce a sound harmonized with the Nyerupepe (see object 12) and whistles.



19. Deka (big skirt worn at the back) and Nya kadengo (small apron worn at the front)

The skirts are made of goatskin. They have straps to tie around the waist with ease. The small front skirt is made with round metallic pebbles attached to the hem. These skirts were only worn by married women.

It is believed that if a skirt fell, it was a curse and rain would not fall for a long time. Men are generally not allowed to touch a woman's skirt unless they are married. If they touch it, they may be accused of adultery.



3. Selected rituals and ceremonies of the Ik

a. Marriage ceremonies and rituals

Among the Ik, a young man selects a marriage partner, from a clan other than his. Thereafter he will consult the parents or guardians on the choice of the girl he is intending to marry and her clan. Once the parents are in agreement with his choice, he starts to provide intensive manual labour such as digging for the girl's family during which time the two families consult each other before an 'official welcome' by the girl's parents and relatives.

After this welcome, gifts such as honey and wild meat from the boy's side become public knowledge. From this time, the boy and the girl can meet openly. The final stage is marked by the payment of the dowry and the girl is taken to the boy's home.

A long process ensues during which the boy's relatives, mainly his sisters and friends lay an 'ambush' to 'capture' the girl. This is normally done during the collection of firewood or water, or in an isolated place where the girl may not be able to resist.

Once this is successful, the girl is brought to the boy's aunt and both of them are anointed with oil/ghee. The attire is changed from girl's to woman's skirts. She now becomes a wife. At this point, it is forbidden to change back to the girl's attire. It is believed that if one does so, they will attract the wrath of the gods who will strike the area with drought. From this time on, any relation with another man will be regarded as adultery.

After this stage, the boy brings a bull and a he-goat and slaughters them at

the home of his mother-in-law. His parents also bring local beer in large quantities and the wedding ceremony starts with much eating, drinking, and dancing. Part of the meat of the bull is shared among the parents and relatives of the girl. The meet is boiled and eaten by the public.

Dowry

Given that Ik livelihood depends mainly on subsistence farming, part of dowry includes manual labour to the girl's family by her suitor, agricultural products such as foodstuff, honey, beehives, gourds, farm implements such as hoes, pangas, axes, spears and kitchenware. Manual labour (building houses, cultivation, etc) is provided as long as the son-in-law is alive.

Apart from manual labour, dowry also includes items equivalent to what the father of the girl paid as dowry for the mother. In some cases, especially with the introduction of a cash economy, manual labour can be converted into money.

b. Age Initiation ritual for men

The Ik perform several rituals for boys and men as they advance in age.

The age initiation ritual for men include:

1. Initiation to manhood

This is the initiation of a teenager to manhood, where a member can then join the older youth groups and get ready to marry. A goat is slaughtered by every teenager participating in the ritual. This only involves male youth up to the age of 25.

2. Initiation to the elderly group

After the age of 25, the Ik men undergo another initiation ritual to become members of the elderly group. In this case, a bull is slaughtered by every initiating individual who must also prepare “mes” beer for elders. It is during this party that the elders initiate grown up youth into the elders’ group. After this, one is qualified to sit close to elders, serve them or speak among them. It is the members of this group that elders can send for errands.

There is no initiation for women. A woman is respected and considered a senior woman after marriage.

Normally a woman whose dowry has not been paid, does not deserve respect and this shame is directed towards the husband and his relatives..

c. Rituals associated with harvesting honey.

For many generations until about three decades ago, the Ik have largely depended on gathering wild food. One of the foods they have traditionally collected from the wilderness is honey.

Harvesting honey starts by making and placing beehives in strategic places or trees. The Ik beehives are installed on the most difficult trees to climb, out of reach of any stranger or honey eating animals. Any climbing aids are removed and hidden for use in the future. The selected trees must therefore be very tall.

The last stage of installing the beehive is reached in this way: a man gets a small piece of wood and starts tapping the beehive continuously

while uttering the following: “Come from Thongot-mmmm!!!, come from Morungole-mmmm!!!, come from Mogila-mmmm!!!”, and so on. This is a call for bees to come from various locations to colonise the beehive and is said at the top of one’s voice. At this point, the installation process is over and the man descends.

After a couple of weeks or a month, the owner of a beehive goes to check if it has been colonised and he will do this several times. By passers will

also help and keep checking. Once colonised, four to six months will elapse before harvest. One must therefore have several beehives installed at different intervals so as to guarantee constant honey harvest during the season (February to June).

This is about four months after the first and the last rains.

To harvest honey, one needs to carry the following tools: an ax, a panga, a

local chisel locally known as *Lörökön* and a honey bag (*Yó*, see item 11) and a matchbox or any fire-making tools. One climbs to the top of the tree where the beehive is. Fire is lit on a small piece of wood which generates smoke that chases the bees away and the person up in the tree starts collecting.

After harvesting, honeycombs/ wax are used to smear the hive to allow the bees to re-colonise the hive.

Cultural Heritage Sites

a. The sun observation shrine (Itelesa Feti)

This shrine is used to forecast the weather. In the Ik community, weather forecasting is an important element for predicting climate conditions and determining which agricultural and food gathering activities to conduct and when.

The weather is forecast in three different ways. Observation of the sun movement either on the morning horizon or in the evening during specific months; observation of the movements of the stars according to their position in the sky during particular months as a way of backing up the sun observation data; and

following and counting of months in the traditional calendar which is well-known to the elderly members of the community.

Such information is verified in these three different ways and then compared with similar data from past years.



*Some of the Ik elders
inaugurating the shrine in
2015*

b. Itowees, the annual festival sites

The Ik traditionally believe that, at the end of every year, there must be a start and end point for every activity.

During Itowees, the Ik mark the end of the year, analyse the past and express appreciation for positive results of the ending year. They also condemn any wrong deeds and cast them off, pray for the best in the following year, open the new Year, open up the farm activities, bless the seeds, pray for rain and for community wellbeing.

In Kamion, the Itowees festival is conducted at Nawadou (first photograph on the right) led by the head of the Terek 1 clan, while in Timu it is celebrated at the Lokongote site (second photograph on the right) led by the head of the Ngidoch clan.



A call to support the Ik to safeguard and promote their cultural heritage

The Ik in Kamion, Timu and Morungole call upon government, civil society organisations, religious institutions and the private sector to support the protection and promotion of their cultural heritage and identity. The Ik community is committed to promoting their cultural heritage resources and to transmit them to their young generation.

Several ways to protect and promote the Ik cultural heritage as an important aspect for their identity, unity, and development, can be explored, but the following could be given priority:

a. Supporting heritage education, documentation and preservation of cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge

Since their eviction from the Kidepo Valley National Park in 1962, the Ik

have not been sufficiently supported to document and preserve their cultural heritage and their extensive knowledge of both mountain and forest life. Supporting the documentation and preservation of the important aspects of Ik cultural heritage and knowledge by relevant government agencies, Civil Society Organisations and the private sector could provide reference materials for young people both in and out of school and eventually enhance heritage education. This would also help to raise the profile of the Ik and their cultural identity.

b. Supporting the Ik house of memory as a cultural tourism centre and space for cultural heritage transmission

For the last 3 years, the Ik House of Memory has attracted some visitors, mainly foreign cultural tourists and

anthropologists. Increased publicity and visits by both Ugandans and foreigners could enhance the potential of the House of Memory as a cultural enterprise.

c. Supporting the revival of traditional economic activities

For centuries, the Ik have depended on bee keeping and harvesting honey not only for economic reasons but also for medicinal reasons. Honey is still used to make beer and as part of dowry among the Ik. Bee keeping could be supported as an important economic activity that can improve the welfare of the Ik community.

The custodians of the Ik of House of Memory were instrumental in generating information for this publication.

It was produced by the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda, an NGO dedicated to promoting the recognition of culture as vital for human development that responds to the country's national identity and diversity.

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