

My first contacts with the Pokot people

When I was a teacher in Kenya, I went through the land of the Pokot people in north-west Kenya in 1970 without really knowing! I had visited northern Uganda and was coming back through Moroto and then south to Amudat and then to Kapenguria. The plains seemed empty as regards people. I only remember at Kapenguria/Makutano seeing a line of wooden shops with men sitting all having the characteristic grey mud-bun at the back of their heads. When Idi Amin came to power in Uganda in 1979 all such cultural expressions were forbidden. About one-sixth of the less than one million Pokot speakers live over the border in Uganda and the Kenyan Pokot cross the border with their animals at will in the dry season looking for grazing.

In the 1950s George Kendagor moved to Kapenguria to begin church planting. He was part of the Africa Inland Church (AIC). They came to strongly oppose the involvement of the AIC in the National Council of Churches (NCCCK) because of their ecumenism, and resigned from AIC.

It was in 1991 when George Kendagor came to visit us in Nairobi. In the previous years since leaving the cover of AIC they had been unable to get registration with the government and had even found themselves in the police cells for unauthorized meetings. They requested to come under the registration of TBC professing to agree with our constitution. One very urgent situation was that they had started two primary schools and without government registration they could not officially be the sponsors. The Catholics were poised to take over these schools. So in August 1991 I made my first visit to them in Kapenguria, to speak at the annual conference of the Bible Faith Church. There were about 40 present, mostly women, and I was asked to speak about the Scriptures and their authority. I brought back an encouraging report to the brethren in Nairobi and we agreed as a church that BFC be affiliated with us. We had no desire to start what might begin to look like a denomination! On the one hand we were seeking to help such brethren who had been denied registration. On the other hand we were seriously taking our responsibility before the government as they were registering under us.



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Working with BFC (1991-2001)

I heard that the BFC had a work in a remote area about 100 kms. north called Karapokot, where they ran two primary schools. So in March 1992 I visited Kapenguria again, but with the special purpose of going to this area. Remoteness meant that a primary school teacher might have to walk the whole day from his school just to get transport to go to Kapenguria. I remember hearing the story of one non-Pokot teacher who on such a walk passed by lions under a tree and, hardly surprisingly, wet his trousers! BFC combined primary schools with their church planting work believing it is the most effective way of reaching the community. I had my doubts about it but they convinced me that this was wisdom. First, many other churches, like the Catholics, are very eager to get hold of the young people. A further reason is that because polygamy is universal they believed they had to be involved in education so as to see young men converted and develop into future leaders without being polygamous.

The visit to Kamketo and Kasei was very brief, arriving near midnight and then leaving to return at 18.00 the following day.

It was on the next visit to Kapenguria in December 1992 that I met Domoo Lokerisa, my first real contact from Karapokot. What a story brother Domoo had to tell! Raiding the cattle of the neighbouring Turkana and Karamojong was part of culture, and Domoo had become a leader of such cattle raiders when in 1984 the Lord saved him as one of the first in the area to become a Christian. One such raid when many of his companions were killed made him consider the things of God. He told me about the area, how undeveloped and unevangelized it was, and that the main problems were 'beer drinking, cattle raiding and traditional medicine'. He belonged to the clan that is looked up to the perform the traditional sacrifices and he had particular responsibility. When he became a Christian the Pokot planned to take a brother of his and bury him alive to appease the spirits (their traditional religion is centred round ancestral spirits). Thankfully he managed to escape. Such traditions have been the main cause of problems for Domoo and he even succumbed to the temptation to take a third wife as a way of ending the quarrelling between the first two!

It was in April 1994 that I was able to spend three full days in Karapokot. One of the reasons why the area is so inaccessible is that there had been no bridge over the Kanyang'areng River (it was subsequently constructed). On this visit we found a lorry stuck midstream and we unsuccessfully tried to help out. It was still there when we returned a few days later. On another occasion there was an abandoned Land Cruiser gutted by sand from the river when the flow submerged the engine.

This was what I wrote from the perspective of the mid-1990s. "15 years ago (1980) the BFC started two centres, at Kamketo and Kasei, where there is now a church meeting and a primary school. It is actually very hard to get children into the schools; at Kamketo, for example, there are only a total of 40 students for the 8 classes. This is not because of the expense but because children are necessary for looking after their animals. The whole area is still very traditional and is largely untouched by the gospel. The next few years are undoubtedly the time of opportunity. While in Karapokot, and observing all the obstacles to the spread of the gospel, I was led to reflect again on the power of the gospel. The seed needs to be sown constantly, watered with prayer, and in His own time the Lord will give the increase."

One of the highlights of the next visit in February 1996 was talking to a couple of groups of old men or 'wazee'. They sit around the market place or the borehole all day talking, receiving news from travellers, and passing on news to them. Hardly one such person would be a churchgoer. Where does one begin with them? The breath-taking beautiful scenery makes it easy to begin with creation, the biblical starting place. But I found that they tended to identify God with creation, so they pray not only to 'God' but also to the hills and the rivers. Traditionally, Africans generally do have a vague concept of a supreme God, but He is very distant and unconcerned with daily affairs. These old men have tended to be ignored by the younger Christians as if they are unreachable. But the Lord is able. The few Christians need to be encouraged here. Talking is a way of life – just sit on the ground, or pull up the traditional stool (which is also used for resting the head when lying on the ground to sleep).

We also visited Chepkinagh, where Andrew Chemolok was seeking to re-establish a church. The Catholics were also there, as was the AIC. But it was the same story as all over Kenya – no teaching. Andrew had a very great desire to join the PTC in Nairobi although he only had

primary school education. We helped to support him so that he could minister full-time. Then we also visited vast hilly area of Korokou, with perhaps 2000 families, and only accessible by a two hour climb up steep and narrow paths from Kasei, which has the closest 'shop' and 'road'. At that time there was no one else actively working there, although the Catholics (who try to get in everywhere) had tried to start a school and the Church of Christ (Campbellites) had 'baptized' many before being expelled by the government. Our group was centred on the home of Domoo, the one who used to be a leader in cattle rustling. It was so encouraging to preach to 10-20 people who had begun to hear the gospel regularly each week. Domoo's younger brother, James, was going there weekly and, because he was a secondary school student, I greatly encouraged him to think of the studies in Nairobi. He actually worked for World Vision photographing children of needy families to be sponsored for education. These were the opportunities open to us, and we thanked the Lord for being able to be of some encouragement. Andrew Street from England came out permanently at the end of April and lived in Kapenguria to help in the work. That was another way we are able to help our BFC brethren.

In February 1997 I took David Staub Co-ordinator of the American RBMS for a visit before crossing over into Uganda. When we reached the top of Korokou we were surprised to be received by a group of women who had heard that visitors were coming. They had constructed some logs as pews under a tree and wanted someone to preach to them every Sunday! A few of them had contact with the BFC elsewhere. We took a little time with them, then walked over to Domoo's place. There were about 20, including six men, who were eager to hear the Word. And then we were told of another group in the area desiring preaching. This was new and so encouraging – people requesting preaching; men willing to listen. One man asked us to return for he had learned something new that afternoon about Abraham. In this area of Karapokot there were still areas where there were no churches. The culture of cattle raiding against the neighbouring tribes had been greatly controlled by the governments so that the gospel work was made easier. But there were still so many guns about. While visiting a home near Kamketo a young man strode away from the hut with his AK-47! With prevailing peace as an opportunity of development, the area was set for change in the next decade. There was a new openness, so this was the time of opportunity for the preaching of the gospel.

In October 1997 we walked up the steep hill behind Chepkinagh, Tarakit (which rises to over 8,000 ft.), which took about an hour and a half. This was an area where there has never been any church work, and we found men again having congregated just passing the time of day. One of them had his AK-47 that he placed against the bushes. The women were called and we had an impromptu audience of about 40 souls. Andrew Chemolok later reported that a few came down to see him begging that there be a Sunday service. The first one was held that very Sunday. What an opportunity, but there was a shortage of manpower. We asked for prayer especially for the Lord to raise up trained workers here – we were very eager to have one come and do our studies in Nairobi. That afternoon as we left there was another opportunity to preach to about 30 men by the bore hole which uses windmill power. I spoke to them about the day of judgment and had an unusually good hearing. This was what went on day by day as we were able to visit.

Trinity Baptist Church Nairobi became responsible for this work in 2001. There are now hundreds of baptized believers, four men who have been set aside for ministry with 12 local churches, with three other meeting places. A Bible School with nine students was started in

2025. The church also sponsors comprehensive schools in each place where there is a church, and three secondary schools in the main centres. The UK charity TRAIN(Kenya) helps to support the work financially and with visits.