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TURKANA FUNCTIONAL ART

ALAN DONOVAN

As nomads, the Turkana of northern Kenya produce few articles that are not functional. Items must be easily transportable and made of materials that are readily available in their harsh desert homeland. Designs of personal or household objects have been distilled through generations of use. Although designs are passed on from one generation to the next, there is a great variety in these traditional forms, depending on the skill, ingenuity, and pride of the maker.

Turkana designs are a study in artistic economy, making good use of few raw materials in functional shapes that are simple but elegant. Some designs do not appear to be wholly dependent on function, but derive from a shared aesthetic. This seems particularly true of milk containers, which are almost always made by the women who use them. Although created with the most rudimentary tools, many containers are incredibly beautiful in design. They represent a remarkable feat of craftsmanship since the rounded

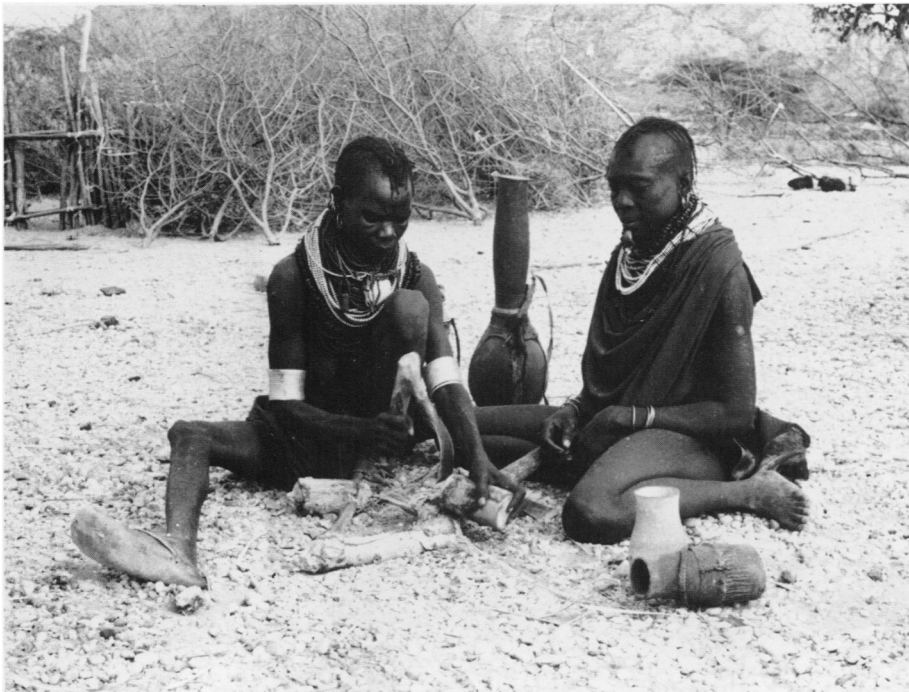
container walls are often only a few millimeters thick.

One of the most exquisite of Turkana containers is the *akarum*, carved out of one piece of wood (Figs 1,2,6). Possibly based on a gourd prototype, it has a rounded bottom, and the inside is chipped out with a long metal spike on a wooden shaft called *eketiticht*. The top is a long, graceful cylinder, also hollowed out by hand, which serves as a goblet similar to the cup-lid of a modern thermos bottle. It is held in place by a leather joint embroidered onto the wooden bottom of the container with a hide cord. The *akarum* may be elaborately decorated depending on the area from which it comes or the wealth of the owner. On the west side of Lake Turkana (formerly Lake Rudolf), most are covered with black soot and polished with animal fat, thus protecting them from insect pests and giving them a fine dark sheen. Leather straps may be added for holding the lid secure, for hanging the container in the temporary houses, or for attaching it to

the donkey when the household is moved. These straps are often finished with decorative leather coils. Cowrie shells, obtained through trade, may be added to the straps binding the rounded bottom or they may be attached to the leather insert between the bottom and the top.

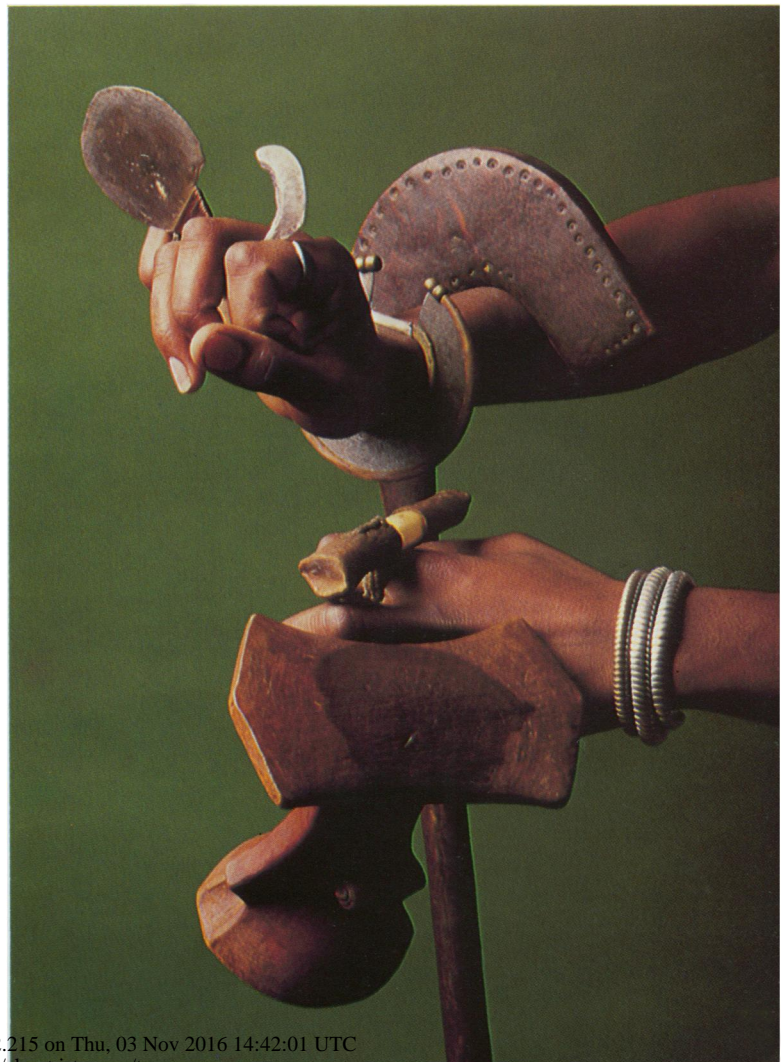
On the east side of Lake Turkana the *akarum* is adorned with a pattern of red ochre over a layer of black soot. This reflects the influence of the neighboring Samburu, a group related to the Maasai who are known for their ochre-covered skin and hair. These vessels are elaborately decorated with colorful glass beads (perhaps because of the proximity of the Samburu and their beadwork) or with beads chipped out of the hard shell of the ostrich egg. Samburu women also carve and use a container that is very similar to the *akarum*, called a *mila*. But while the lid of the *akarum* is tall and elegant, the *mila's* is shaped more like a goblet, closer to the phallic shape often found in Samburu and Maasai beadwork and utensils.

Another wooden food container carved by Turkana women is the *eburi*. A woman uses an adze called *arong* (Fig. 1) to form the basic cylinder from the branch or trunk of a thorn tree, and hollows it out with the *eketiticht*. She covers the ends with cowhide stretched and molded in wet sand. The bottom piece is bound to the container with leather thongs, and the top becomes the lid. Designs may then be burned onto the surface with a hot nail or pieces of metal. Sometimes a plaited leather handle is added. A woman uses the smaller *eburi* as a cosmetic jar to hold the animal fat



1. A TURKANA WOMAN USES AN *ARONG* (SMALL ADZE) TO CARVE THE BASIC SHAPE OF AN *EBURI* (WOODEN FAT CONTAINER). BETWEEN THE WOMEN IS AN *AKARUM* (WOODEN MILK CONTAINER).

TOP: 2. *AKARUM* (WOODEN MILK CONTAINERS). THE ONE ON THE FAR LEFT IS ACTUALLY A *MILA* FROM THE NEIGHBORING SAMBURU. THE SECOND FROM LEFT IS THE LID OF AN OLD LARGE *AKARUM* CONVERTED TO A CONTAINER BY INVERTING IT AND COVERING IT WITH HIDE. ALL OF THESE ARE FROM THE EAST SIDE OF LAKE TURKANA AND ARE DECORATED WITH RED OCHRE AND BEADWORK, SHOWING THE INFLUENCE OF THE NEIGHBORING SAMBURU. BOTTOM LEFT: 3. *ABIRO*, MEN'S WALKING STICKS. SOME CAN ALSO BE USED FOR KNOCKING DOOM PALM NUTS FROM THE TREE, OR AS WEAPONS. THOSE WITH CURVED HANDLES CAN BE CARRIED OVER THE ARM. BOTTOM RIGHT: 4. ABOVE: *ABARAIT* (CIRCULAR WRIST KNIFE), FINGER KNIVES, AND WALKING STICK HANDLE. BELOW: HEADREST OR STOOL, PELICAN BONE SNUFF BOX, ALUMINUM BANGLES.



used for greasing her neck to prevent chafing from her tightly wound necklaces.

Another elegant container made of rather crude materials is the *akatom* (Fig. 7). This jug-shaped vessel is fashioned with wet sand out of the stomach or skin of the camel. The neck is attached with intricate coils of hide or palm fiber, and the small hole is fitted with a wooden stopper. The Turkana food bowl (*atubwa*) also combines function and artistry (Fig. 9). The bottom is rounded to keep the bowl from tipping over on the sand floor of the Turkana house, and the rim curves inward to prevent spilling. The outside of the bowl may be decorated with burned dots or linear motifs. They are usually carved so that one can see the growth rings of the tree trunk, which adds to the beauty of the bowl.

Containers called *elephit* hold camel's or cow's milk (Fig. 10). They may be carved in a bucket shape from a light desert palm wood and decorated with burned designs and leather thongs. Accompanying spoons and dippers are simple and graceful, often with ridges on the handles that are both decorative and functional. Many of the spoons have designs burned into them.

The smallest container of the Turkana is the man's snuffbox, made from a hollow pelican bone (Fig. 4). Each end has

a skin cover bridged by a loop of leather so that the object can be worn on a man's finger. A similar but larger container carved by men is used as a sort of emergency portable hatbox: when the desert sands blow, it protects the precious ostrich feathers that adorn the man's painted clay headdress. Buffalo horns, fitted with hide lids and hung with braided hide and cow-tail tassels, are also used for this purpose. Men may carry other snuffboxes made of tiny gourds. These are usually incised with an image of an ostrich or giraffe, the animal's long neck represented on the tiny neck of the gourd and the body on the rounded portion. These animals also appear on a man's headrest, along with his beloved cattle.

It is in the art of personal adornment that the Turkana express themselves most freely, yet their ornaments reflect restrictions of age, sex, clan, and social status. A Turkana's position in life is discernible by the type of ornaments and hairstyle he or she wears. Personal adornment is very elaborate, making use of almost every plant and animal part as well as other indigenous materials. Wealthy women wear masses of a necklace called *akarim*, composed of beads laboriously chipped out of ostrich eggshells (Fig. 5). Traditionally they are part of a Turkana girl's dowry, although this practice is being discouraged and has all but disappeared. An occasional bead may adorn a container, a snuffbox, or even a senior warrior's spear.

Because of the scarcity of other raw materials, aluminum cooking pots are being melted down to make attractive, lightweight jewelry for both men and women. Brass and iron beads are also made by the Turkana, and iron is smelted for spears, arrows, and metal cow and goat bells. Spears are meticulously balanced for flight, with an iron blade on one end of the long wooden shaft and a spike for standing it up in the ground on the other. These spears, over two meters long, are among the longest and most graceful in Africa. The shape of the Turkana shield, made of buffalo, crocodile, or giraffe hide, is also unique: it is long, graceful, and symmetrical, totally different from the diamond-shaped Maasai shield. Young warriors practice for hours on end defending themselves from thrown stones with rapid acrobatic movements of the narrow shield. The Turkana warrior is always equipped with a second line of defense: a clever round blade worn on the wrist, covered on both sides with a leather strip, called *abarait* (Fig. 4). The leather cover can be removed quickly to convert the knife into a fierce weapon. Finger knives are also designed for cutting, peeling, and fighting.

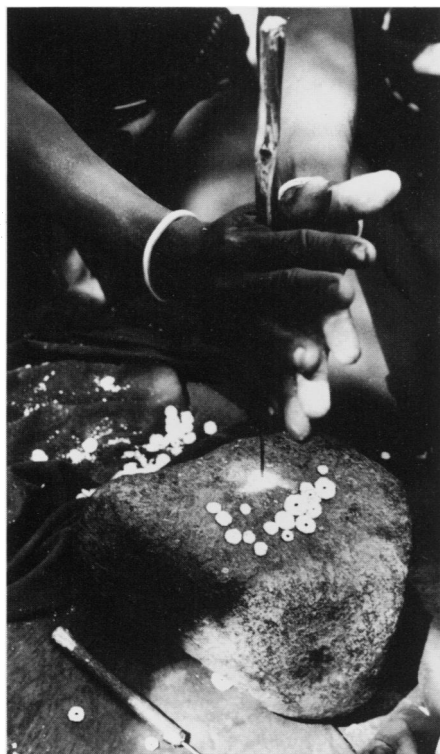
A man is never without his walking stick, *abiro* (Fig. 3), or headrest, *ekechelong* (Fig. 8). The former is usually either the hockey-shaped traditional stick, often inlaid with aluminum studs, or a cane with a rounded top that can be hung over the arm. Headrests basically take two superbly simple forms: a two-legged version that can be carried on the arm by means of a leather strap between the two legs (sometimes incised with typical Turkana animal or geometric shapes) or a one-legged design, also fitted with a leather strap for carrying. The headrests may be of astonishing beauty, and men will trek for hundreds of kilometers to trade items to a carver who is known to be particularly gifted in creating them. The headrest preserves the man's elaborate coiffure while he sleeps.

Elders wear aluminum noseplugs — gigantic leaf-shaped appendages — and lip plugs carved in simple oval shapes from elephant ivory or hippo teeth. Women wear lip plugs of intricately braided metal wire, fitted at the bottom with a special red glass bead. Those for older women, especially wives of important men or those with special functions, are made of melted aluminum in tubular or diamond shapes.

Turkana women also make a fertility doll (*ikidet*) of wood or doom palm nuts, which a young girl carries until she bears her first child. These vary greatly in craftsmanship and design. Some are heavily beaded with extravagant ornamentation, including tiny metal earrings or lip plugs such as those worn by the women. Others may be simply a bit of plaited sisal and fish vertebrae attached to a forked stick or a cluster of palm nuts.

Turkana design rests on three main principles: availability of materials, transportability, and a historical aesthetic. All of the personal and household items discussed here represent graceful responses to the dictates of environment and tradition. With limited tools and materials, the Turkana have created exquisite objects of art that reflect and enrich their lives. □

TOP LEFT: 6. AKARUM (WOODEN MILK CONTAINER). THE TOP IS USED AS A GOBLET. BOTTOM LEFT: 7. AKATOM (FAT STORAGE CONTAINER) MADE OF A CAMEL'S STOMACH AND FITTED WITH A WOODEN STOPPER. THE NECK IS EMBROIDERED WITH SINEWS. TOP RIGHT: 8. EKECHELONG (HEADREST). USED FOR SITTING OR TO PROTECT AN ELABORATE COIFFURE, THEY ARE TREASURED POSSESSIONS, AND A MAN WILL WALK HUNDREDS OF KILOMETERS FOR ONE BY A PARTICULARLY SKILLFUL CARVER. CENTER: 9. ATUBWA (CARVED WOODEN FOOD BOWLS) AND A DIPPER. THE BOWLS HAVE ROUNDED BOTTOMS SO AS TO REST ON SAND FLOORS WITHOUT SPILLING. BOTTOM: 10. TURKANA ELEPHIT (WOODEN MILK BUCKETS), SOME DECORATED WITH A HOT IRON. SOME ARE REPAIRED WITH ALUMINUM STRIPS OR SISAL THREAD.



5. A TURKANA WOMAN USES AN AWL-LIKE TOOL TO DRILL HOLES IN AKARIM (BEADS CHIPPED FROM OSTRICH EGGSHELL). THE BEADS ARE STRUNG ON DOOM PALM FIBER AND ROLLED ON A STONE UNTIL ROUND. THEY ARE USED AS DOWRY BY TURKANA WOMEN.

