

DIVINATION
and
HEALING

Potent Vision

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The Laibon Diviner and Healer among Samburu Pastoralists of Kenya

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Laibons are male diviner-healer-prophets found among Maa-speaking peoples of East Africa including Maasai and Samburu pastoralists of Kenya and Tanzania.¹ Born with an inherited ability to “see” events or forces normally concealed from others, laibons practice divination with “stones” (actually, many types of objects) thrown from a hollow gourd or cow’s horn, and have the ability to make mystically powerful medicines used to protect against physical and supernatural harm. Their divination and protective medicines are widely sought by jeopardized individuals, including barren women, warriors traveling to dangerous places, and people who suspect that neighbors or kin are trying to harm them with sorcery.

This chapter locates the Samburu laibon within a general analytic framework of divination and healing and within the ethnographic context of East African pastoralist societies. In the course of this description, I wish to make several points about laibons, including their historical and cultural location, the therapeutic value of the laibon’s healing, the language and shared meanings of the divination process, and finally their role as mediator between the human community and powerful unseen forces that act on them.

The institution of laibon is unique to Maa-speaking cattle pastoralists of Kenya and Tanzania, although it is situated within a larger “prophet complex”

found among pastoral and agropastoral groups of East Africa (Waller 1995). Laibons are said to have appeared mysteriously among Maasai several centuries ago, when a founding ancestor, Kidongoi, appeared as a boy among Purko Maasai and founded the Lo'onkidong'i lineage, from which modern Maasai laibons claim descent. During the internecine Maasai wars of the nineteenth century, laibons played important roles as prophets and war leaders, where the defeat of the Laikipiak Maasai by the Purko and Kisongo Maasai was attributed to the more powerful medicines of their laibon, Mbatiany. Following this war, the Laikipiak and their laibons dispersed into various groups, including the Samburu, who are closely related Maa-speaking cattle herders living north of Maasai in present-day Samburu and Marsabit Districts in north-central Kenya.²

Laibons (from *ol-oiboni* [*il-oibonok*, plural] in Maa) have an inherited ability to "see" or predict (*a-ibon*) past, present, or future events ordinary people cannot see. These predictions are achieved while dreaming (*a-detidet*), while in inebriated states, or by divination, through throwing stones and other objects from a divination container, the *nkidong*. Not all members of a laibon family become laibons, only those who demonstrate a gift for prediction and who gain a following of clients. While both men and women may possess this ability, only males are permitted to practice divination with the *nkidong* gourd, and only a very few laibons reach the stature of great prophets such as Mbatiany.³

In addition to their ability to divine and prophesy, certain laibons acquire secret knowledge to prepare powerful medicines (*ntasim*), which are worn as charms or bracelets and protect against physical dangers, such as diseases, wild animals, or human enemies, or against personal attacks of humans using sorcery to inflict harm. Only a laibon's divination can determine the presence of sorcery, and only a laibon's *ntasim* can protect an individual from sorcery's effects. *Ntasim* protective substances are made from the roots and barks of particular plants; but so too are sorcery poisons that one can buy from sorcerers or unscrupulous laibons. Thus, divination, sorcery, and healing are viewed as a battle between laibons who know each other's identity, although this is never revealed to the public. The death of a laibon is almost always attributed to the sorcery of a rival laibon.

As a cultural anthropologist, I studied the Leaduma family of Samburu laibons living in Marsabit District, in northern Kenya, for eighteen months from 1974 to 1976, for six months in 1985, and during six summer visits during the

1990s (Fratkin 1979, 1991, 2004). The most powerful laibons in this family were Lekati Leaduma (born circa 1932), his son Kanikis (born 1966), and Lekati's uncle and rival Kordidi Leaduma (born circa 1922). Lekati Leaduma's great-grandfather Charrar was a Laikipiak Maasai laibon and refugee from the Maasai wars who, around 1875, moved to Marsabit Mountain in present-day Marsabit District and joined the Lorokushu section of Samburu. He fathered several sons who became leading laibons, including Somanga, Lekati's grandfather, and his great-uncle Ngaldaiyo, who achieved notoriety in the late 1920s for his participation in the ritualized murder of the white rancher Powys (Duder and Simpson 1997). Lekati's father, Kimojikole ("Six Fingers," a trait found among some laibons), and his uncle Kordidi lived among the Ariaal (mixed Samburu/Rendille pastoralists) in Marsabit District, where Lekati was raised. Lekati learned about divination and *ntasim* medicines from his uncle Kordidi, a more powerful laibon than Kimojikole; Kordidi in turn learned it from his uncle Ngaldaiyo (the one arrested by the British), who in turn learned it from Somanga. Thus, both the divination technique and knowledge of *ntasim* medicine were directly passed for several generations from Laikipiak Maasai origins.

When Lekati's mother was pregnant, it is said she had dreams that came true (a feature also said about Lekati's son Kanikis). Lekati gained a reputation for his prophecies as a warrior, but for various reasons (including conflicts with his father) he rejected his role as a laibon and tried to live a normal life as a young man. By the time he married, however, Lekati, persuaded by Lorokushu clan elders, resumed his practice of divination and healing. Throughout his career, he was known for both the accuracy of his divination predictions and for the power of his *ntasim* medicines in combating sorcery. When Lekati Leaduma died at the age of fifty-five in 1987, many attributed his death to the sorcery of a rival laibon. Today, Lekati's son Kanikis, a man in his mid-thirties, is emerging as his father's successor.

The Laibon as Diviner and Healer among the Samburu

Samburu are a population of 100,000 who live in acephalous lineage-based settlements in Samburu and Marsabit Districts in north-central Kenya. They

are Nilotic cattle and small stock (goats and sheep) pastoralists closely related to the Maasai. Samburu share Maasai cosmology, which holds that their world was created by a supreme being (*En-gai*), a distant force appealed to by elders in prayers, blessings, and sacrifices for rain, peace, and the fertility of their families and livestock herds. In addition to blessings, Samburu can appeal to *En-gai* to punish a wrongdoer by invoking the curse (*l-deket, l-deketa*), a moral sanction most effective against close relatives, although it is rarely used. For those Samburu lacking moral justification but who, acting out of jealousy or greed, wish to harm someone, one turns to sorcery, a powerful and immoral means of supernatural retribution. Samburu believe that sorcery is used by neighbors or kin to bring harm or misfortune to a person, his or her family, or their livestock. While the occurrence of sorcery is not discussed openly, it is nevertheless held by many people to be widespread and potent.

Sorcery is achieved by using sorcery poisons (*nkurupore, nkuruporen*), which are mystically powerful substances in the form of powders ground from certain plants and animals such as snakes and chameleons (described in Fratkin 1996). Acquired secretly, these substances may be surreptitiously placed on a person or his house, or on a stick that is thrown into a cattle enclosure. Once ensorcelled, a man may lose his cattle to illness; a woman may have successful pregnancies but lose all her children after birth; or a victim may be driven mad, become blind, or even die. The only effective treatment against sorcery is to seek a laibon who can determine the sorcery through his *nkidong* divination and combat it with his *ntasim* protective medicines.

The laibon's divination and curing rituals may be a public or private event. Public divinations are held for the community as a whole, particularly when the laibon has dreamed about or divined the presence of enemies, diseases, or other dangers. But divinations and healing performed at the request of individuals for personal problems are done privately, although not in secret, in the house of the client(s) and with their close kin (for example, wives/husbands, children, brothers).

In both public and private divination sessions, clients and "followers," male elders or warriors who often accompany the laibon, are able to participate in "reading the stones" with the laibon. The *nkidong* divination has particular rules of interpretation based on the number of objects thrown, the type of stones cast, and the configuration with which the stones are cast. To a limited degree the followers of the laibon understand these rules.

Lekati Leaduma's *nkidong* gourd contained over five hundred objects, including polished pebbles, glass marbles, seeds, cowry shells, teeth, horns, pieces made from leather and bone, and metal objects such as coins, bullets, and even a toy car from a monopoly game (see table 9.1). Many of these pieces have explicit meanings that are known to regular observers. For example, a hyena's tooth signifies Turkana enemies; two leather rings tied together means twins; a glass thermometer means hospital. Most important is a red glass ball, which indicates the presence of sorcery. Marbles and polished stones are categorized by color and signify opposition or conflict when thrown in opposing sets: red/yellow, black/white.

In addition to the specific *type* of stone thrown, the *number* of stones cast also has specific meanings, where each digit from zero to nine has a name and meaning. For example, if three separate throws of the stones are cast that add up to thirty-two objects, two is the meaningful number and has the same value as two, twelve, twenty-two, and so forth. Much attention in the divination ritual is paid to counting the objects, and the laibon often has the participants help in their count. The meaning of Leaduma's *nkidong* numerology is listed below; this system is shared by other laibons in the Leaduma family.

- 0 Nothing (*me-ata*). A negative response to the question
- 1 The ear (*n-kiook*). News, information
- 2 The leg (*n-keju*). Someone is coming
- 3 Cattle stick (*e-seki*). Pertaining to cattle
- 4 Strength (*n-golon*). Good fortune, ritually propitious
- 5 Journey (*e-lototo*). Someone is going on a journey
- 6 Meeting (*n-kiguena*). An important discussion or argument
- 7 Meat (*n-kiri*). Ritual feast or reconciliation
- 8 Peace, laughter (*n-kuenia*). Peace, safety, joy
- 9 Supernatural force (*n-golon o-leng*). Mystical danger, sorcery, *ntasim*

Although the divination participants may understand the number and type of stone thrown, the ultimate interpretation rests with the laibon's inherent ability to assess their meaning based on how they are thrown, their configuration. "When the laibon sees the stones, it is like a hunter reading animal tracks," said one follower of Leaduma. "He can see movement and can tell what is happening. We who follow the laibon know how to read the stones, but

Table 9.1

Contents of Leaduma's Nkidong Gourd

OBJECT	SIGNIFICANCE
77 white stones	Numerical object
123 glass marbles	Numerical object
227 small colored pebbles	Numerical object
20 miscellaneous crystals	Numerical object
3 coins (East African shilling, 5 cent, 50 cent)	Money
3 red glass balls	Sorcery
8 small cowries	Pregnancy
2 large cowries	Pregnancy
3 <i>se'eki</i> seeds (<i>Cordia ovalis</i> R.Br.)	Crying
2 <i>rankau</i> seeds (<i>Acacia gerrardii</i> Benth.)	Sorcery
1 <i>medimokon</i> seed (<i>Viscum tuberculatum</i> A.Rich)	Insanity
13 <i>lokorosho</i> seed (<i>Caralluma speciosa</i> N.E.Br.)	Sorcery
1 <i>lokore</i> (<i>Obetia pinnatifida</i> Baker)	Death, illness
1 lion skin knot	Danger to livestock
1 camel skin knot	Danger to camels
1 cow tail hair knot	Danger to cattle
1 cow skin knot	Danger to Samburu
2 goatskin pieces (<i>Lekiritin</i>)	Blessings
1 goat tongue	Blessing
1 lion's claw (<i>lkardati</i>)	Nkidong blessing
1 beaded piece (<i>bulibuli</i>)	Danger to Rendille
1 lion fur ball	Extreme danger
1 rhino horn tip with ntasim	Ntasim protection
4 dik-dik horns with ntasim	Ntasim protection
3 plastic pens with ntasim	Ntasim protection

1 ivory piece	Danger by elephant
2 clear crystals	Water
1 lion skin cross	Danger to children
5 goatskin crosses	Children
1 blood arrow (<i>lkuret</i>)	Blacksmiths
1 metal cylinder	Blacksmiths
1 metal ball	Unknown
1 hollow metal piece	Peace
1 metal lip plug	Turkana people
1 metal chain	Unknown
1 metal ring	Blacksmiths
2 brass bullets	War
1 threaded brass cylinder	Peace
3 crystals (green, orange, clear)	Water
1 white oval stone	Good fortune
1 red <i>mparua</i> bead	Women
1 pink crystal	Women
1 hyena tooth	Turkana people
1 plastic piece	No meaning
2 thermometer glass pieces	Hospital
1 pottery piece	Good fortune
1 lion's canine	Lion
5 wood pieces with ntasim	Good, protection
1 ring of red and yellow beads	Rendille people
TOTAL: 538 pieces	

only the laibon knows what will happen." It is the laibon's ability to "see the unseen," whether in dreams, spontaneous prophecy, or reading divination stones, that sets off his ability and power.

Case 1: The Fainting Girl

A family asked Lekati Leaduma to treat their child, a twelve-year-old girl who for some time had been listless and uncommunicative. Her refusal to eat had only grown worse as her parents beat her in frustration. She became weak and withdrawn and developed fainting spells, sometimes three or four times a day. Initially, the girl's father consulted an herbalist to treat the girl, who proclaimed the man's daughter was suffering from measles, although eruptions did not appear on her skin. The herbalist treated her with strong emetics to purge her of the illness, but the girl's condition worsened. Finally, the family sought the intervention of the laibon Lekati Leaduma. The laibon performed a public divination outside the girl's house, attended by the girl, her parents, her father's brother, and five neighbors, men and women.

Leaduma sat on an elder's stool, his back to the house. The client and her family sat facing him. Leaduma spread out his blue cloth and placed his *l-maneta* (objects to "tie" the divination, discussed below), which are two cowry shells and black and white rocks, on the left and right side of the cloth. Holding his divination gourd, Leaduma asked, "Who is going to open the nkidong divination?" The father gave his daughter a shilling to place on the cloth, and Leaduma gave the young girl yellow ntasim to sniff up her nose. He said, "This nkidong knows truths and lies. Tell me the truth. What happened to this girl?" He then spit air into the opening of the nkidong gourd. Shaking the gourd vigorously, Leaduma removed his hand in quick succession from the mouthpiece and shook out three sets of "stones" onto the blue cloth. The father and Leaduma counted the stones and put them in a pile. Thirty-nine pieces were thrown, including a bullet, a hyena's tooth, and a clear crystal.

"What do you see about this girl? Tell me truths, not lies."

He threw sixty-two pieces.

"Tell me what has happened to her. Is she cursed?"

He threw nine stones.

To the girl's father he said, "She has been cursed by a woman who lives with Longieli clan. Two teeth are missing from her mouth."

Immediately the mother, who had been threatening to slap the girl for

being unresponsive, put her arms around the girl's shoulders. It was now apparent that it was not the girl's problem alone.

Leaduma, to the nkidong gourd, asked, "Is it true?"

He threw three stones.

"Is it true this person is cursed?"

He threw thirty-seven stones.

"Is it true or not?"

To the father Leaduma said, "The nkidong sometimes gives false information. But all I can do is tell what it says to me, and what I've seen is she is cursed by a woman."

The father said, "When the girl was young, I used to leave my animals in a place where there were two women from a *laisi* family [*Samburu and Ariaal families with powerful blessings and curses*]. One is still alive, and the other is dead."

Leaduma then asked the nkidong: "Who actually cursed this girl?"

He threw seven stones.

"Is it the woman from Longieli clan? Is it true?"

He threw thirty-five stones.

"Someone has traveled to make this curse," he said.

The father answered, "Yes. It was the old woman who died."

"Yes, she cursed the girl before she died. Who is this without any teeth?

A woman or a man?" Leaduma asked.

He threw six stones.

The father answered: "The girl was very young, walking with others to the wells, and a woman who was passing just spoke to her [*that is, cursed her*]."

Then the girl said, "I feel like I am going to faint."

Addressing his daughter for the first time, the father asked, "What happens before you faint?"

She answered, "I feel pain on my ribs." (Although she did not faint, she looked ill and scared.)

Leaduma asked the nkidong: "Was she cursed while walking to the wells?"

He threw five stones.

"Is this person known? The stones say you know this person. That you knew her before you were married, when you were a warrior."

Leaduma threw ten.

He asked the father, "Do you know we can make people quarrel, we can

beat a bad person who won't admit he is bad. Even some people might say I'm a bad person because I reveal secrets. But the nkidong shows this woman cursed the girl. She will be all right because I will give her ntasim. The person who cursed the girl is from Longieli clan. The stones show she came and went back (from the cattle watering area), cursing the girl on the way." Then he asked the nkidong, "Is it true it is that particular woman?"

He threw seven stones.

"This group of stones shows you know her, and the girl was cursed near a small hill."

The father asked, "It is true? Because we were living near a small hill."

Leaduma asked the nkidong, "Is it true it was at this hill?"

He threw four stones.

"Is it true? Is it true? I ask you."

He threw ten stones and asked, "Why?"

He threw eight stones.

Leaduma then gave the nkidong gourd to the girl to blow into the gourd's mouth. He took back the gourd and threw six stones.

"We are finished. This girl will be given ntasim medicine, and she will not be ill."

Immediately following the nkidong divination, Leaduma poured "yellow" ntasim and gave it to the girl to snuff in her nose. He told the family that he would return in the evening to give them all ntasim.

Later, after the cattle were milked, Leaduma entered the house of the family, spread out his blue cloth and small gourds containing ntasim, and marked "yellow" ntasim powder that he placed on the forehead of the girl, as well as on the foreheads of the mother, father, and father's brother. A second ntasim preparation of "yellow" powder mixed with honey was placed on the tongue of each family member. The next day, the girl was looking much better, smiling and carrying on as if nothing had happened.

Later, Leaduma confided in me: "This family has been cursed for many years. It was not a matter of the child; it was a problem of the father and another woman [*not the mother*]. The father knew it was the woman but wanted to see if I knew as well. The nkidong asked about a man but showed it was the woman after all. Why was she cursed? Many people curse others in this place, but not by the mouth [l-deket], but by sorcery [nkurupore]. This woman was angry with the girl's mother and father from long ago. She loved

the husband when he was still a warrior. When she saw that the mother had this young daughter, she was jealous and tried to hurt her. This is not the first bad thing to have happened to them. This problem happened long before this child was born. But my medicine is strong, and she will recover this time. That woman, who did this thing, she is no longer around to hurt anyone else."

This divination affirmed to the family that sorcery was indeed the cause of their problems and that its cause lay in a rivalry between two women that occurred long ago. A hyena's tooth thrown early signifies sorcery, as does the number nine appearing in response to the question "Is she cursed?" The divination reveals social tensions within the group, in this case the jealousy of a jilted lover, which had opened old wounds. Perhaps the husband's infidelity contributed to the problem. (Leaduma said during the nkidong: "Some people might say I'm a bad person because I reveal secrets.") The conflict was real, brought to light of day by the divination process. But the divination may have also helped heal this conflict by its public exposure, leading possibly to a transformation in the husband's relationship with his wife, which may have been a factor in the girl's own illness.

The divination and particular attention by the laibon also validated the girl's illness. This was not just a problem she made up, but the result of a much larger conflict of which she was an innocent victim. Once the cause of their daughter's illness was revealed to be due to the sorcery of a jealous woman, the father and mother moved to protect their daughter, putting their arm around her and paying attention to her complaints. "What happens before you faint?" the father asked his daughter, possibly the first time he had addressed her directly about her illness. Social tensions were revealed and exposed, and the family was able to reunite again. Moreover, the divination exposed tensions of an old love affair (that may not in fact have ended), and the divination and ntasim served to reunite the family and make them whole again.

The Laibon's Ntasim Medicines

Where divination and prophecy are the hallmarks of a true laibon, it is the laibon's ability to heal and protect from misfortune with ntasim medicines that brings many clients to him. The knowledge of ntasim preparation is secret, and a laibon learns most of his medicines from his father or another mentor

through a long apprenticeship. Ntasimi are ritually powerful substances in the form of ground powders made from roots, bark, leaves, and, rarely, the burned remains of certain animals. They are usually worn by a person in small leather amulets tied to their neck beads, or they are carried in a horn or shell container, as the warriors do on raids. A laibon may wear over a dozen ntasim amulets around his neck; Lekati Leaduma wore amulets made from dik-dik horns and crocodile teeth.

Leaduma's medicine bag contained fifteen ntasim preparations in small gourd containers. Classified by Leaduma based on their color (for example, red, yellow, and black ntasim), these medicines are made principally from the roots of the "yellow" lparamunyo tree (*Toddalia asiatica* [L.] Lam.), "black" lkokolai (*Rhamnus staddo* A. Rich.), and "red" reteti tree (*Ficus wakefieldii* Hutch.). In addition to the ntasim powders, the laibon also carries ritual paraphernalia used in the ntasim ritual. Leaduma used a blue cloth, on which he placed the medicines; a large dish made from a seashell, which he used to mix the medicines; and a long metal spoon. Surrounding the dish and gourds are the l-maneta, the "tying ones," which are large objects that encircle and ritually bless the ntasim. These include a cord made from lion's skin, a white rock and a black rock, and two large tiger cowry shells, one female (light) and one male (dark), filled with ntasim and sealed with tree gum. "Tying" is a form of ritual blessing asking for God's protection. By ritually tying an object, a dangerous situation can be averted. For this reason, an essential feature of the laibon's medicine is wearing or carrying a l-maneta object, such as a small bag tied to one's necklaces or carrying a cow's horn filled ntasim. Often a woman will tie an ntasim amulet around a milk gourd belonging to her son, daughter, or husband if they are traveling in dangerous areas.

Case 2: Treating a Woman's Infertility

In another divination and healing session, Leaduma is asked by Lekule (a pseudonym) to perform a divination to determine why his cattle have been ill (they have been suffering from a respiratory illness) and why his first wife is barren. The first wife is childless, while the second wife, perhaps ten years younger, has three children. Leaduma conducts a nkidong and determines that the family has been cursed with sorcery (described in Fratkin 1991). The divination revealed arguments and tensions between the two intermarried

families going back at least to Lekule's and his first wife's wedding day. Sorcery was revealed by a red stone being cast. During the nkidong Leaduma threw thirty-seven stones (seven = feast) and asked, "What is this meat [*that is, feast*] for?" He threw fifty-three (three = cattle) and asked, "Is this a fight over the wedding ox?" Nineteen (nine = mystical power) stones reveal that the wife will go see another laibon for ntasim and that Leaduma will later also provide ntasim for the family and their cattle.

Leaduma later confided to me: "This family had been cursed for some time. Someone had cursed the woman with nkurupore who was later arrested and beaten up by the police. He had marked a small stick with nkurupore and threw it near her gateway where she walked over it. Later when her daughter died, and her cattle died, she knew she was cursed. There were problems between her and her husband's family. But that was not the cause of her troubles. This woman lies, while the second wife is good and does not cheat. This woman is the cause of these problems; she has brought on this badness herself."

Later that evening, Leaduma returned to Lekule's house to dispense the ntasim medicines. Inside were Lekule, his two wives, his sister, and his sister's husband. As requested by Leaduma, Lekule had cut the tail hairs from twenty-seven cattle.

On a blue cloth placed in front of him, Leaduma laid out his ntasim paraphernalia: a large shell in which he mixed the ntasim powders, five ntasim containers, two large tiger shell cowries filled with ntasim, and a black and white stone. All of these items were encircled by a long cord of lion skin.

Leaduma separated the cattle hair into eighty-one strands and then tied them into nine separate rings about five centimeters in diameter. Each ring was soaked in a solution of ntasim mixed with milk, bound in leather, and presented to all the assembled adults to tie around their neck beads or placed on their personal milk gourds and containers.

Leaduma said to Lekule: "Never give away these cattle, although you may continue to milk them or slaughter them for the *lmugit* [*Samburu age-set rites*]. Do not bleed any of these cattle for four days." To the women, the laibon said, "Do not borrow or lend any of your hearth fire for four days." When the ntasim amulets were completed, the laibon and Lekule went outside to prepare a ritual fire (*ntasim laisar*, "of the burning") inside the cattle enclosure

using four ritual woods, which were sprinkled with *ntasim* powders as they burned. The *ntasim* ritual was completed, and Lekule later paid the laibon one heifer cow for his services.

The ability to "tie" is a special gift inherited by members of laibon families in which an object or person is "bound" by *ntasim* to protect them from future dangers. Just as Leaduma ties his *ntasim* and *nkidong* rituals with the cowry shells and lion skin rope, he also ties a protective web around individuals threatened with sorcery. The symbol of tying is found in other aspects of Samburu culture. The village (*nkang*) ties together the homesteads in a continuous circle; a mother ties a string of green beads around her infant's waist (green being a color of life and good health); a warrior ties his girlfriend with a gift of beads and wire to wear around her neck; one who has killed a lion ties a cord made of lion skin around his arm to protect him from avenging lions; a warrior ties a strip of the ox he kills at circumcision around his arm to tie him to his age mates and age set.

In addition to tying, the numerology of the *ntasim* is also significant. In preparing the *ntasim* amulets, the laibon ties eighty-one cattle hairs from twenty-seven cattle into nine rings, each number a multiple of three and nine. The number nine (or three) distinguishes the laibon from the wider Samburu community. In the divination numerology, the numbers four and eight show peace and blessings, but the number nine reveals power and danger, indicating the presence of sorcery, *ntasim*, or other laibons. In public ceremonies such as weddings, elders use even numbers in ritual blessings, where prayers are repeated two or four times ("May god grant you children—En-gai! May god grant you children—En-gai!"); ritual fires contain four types of wood; ceremonies are held on the fourth, eighth, and fourteenth (full moon) day of the month; and so on. Where even numbers imply the moral community, led by the male elders, odd numbers are dangerous and represent mystical power. One does not journey on the fifth day of the week (Wednesday) or hold life passage rituals (birth, circumcision, marriage, and funerals) on an odd numbered day of the month. The laibon, represented by the dangerous number nine, stands outside the moral order of the lineage elders and society; he is an intermediary, not between the human community and God (En-gai) but between the human community and the dangerous world of malevolent supernatural power.

Discussion and Summary

Samburu laibons are not priests "speaking for men to God," nor are they prophets "speaking from God to men."⁴ Rather, they are particular members of an "outsider" family of Maasai who have mystically powerful gifts of prophesy, divination, and protection from perceived supernatural attacks. Although Samburu laibons occasionally perform public divinations and prophesize future events for the welfare of the community, their predictions are in the main concerned with determining the cause of misfortunes, particularly those believed to be caused by sorcery. Unlike Maasai laibons who play a leading role in the large age-set rituals of warriors and in the past commanded large armies (Lamphear 1998:87), laibons among the Samburu lead a quieter, less public life.

Although feared by some for their association with sorcery and suspected by others as charlatans, the laibon nevertheless plays an essential role in Samburu life. At a community level, he acts as an early-warning system of impending dangers, including epidemic diseases, armed attacks, drought, or other disruptions. At the individual level, the laibon plays an unequalled role in combating the effects of sorcery, a dominant if hidden medium of expressing jealousy, fear, and social conflict. Mary Douglas (1970:4) pointed out that beliefs in sorcery are more common among acephalous, decentralized polities lacking courts or police than among centralized or state-structured societies. The Samburu, living in seminomadic lineage-based communities, often at great distances from police posts and towns, have little recourse to higher authorities to settle interpersonal and local disputes. In these communities, one seeks powerful intermediaries, independent from the lineage-based authority of the elders, to intervene in social conflict. Moreover, the society needs someone capable of determining the presence of sorcery or supernatural threat and competent in fighting these forces with his supernaturally powerful medicines. Seeking the laibon's divination and *ntasim* medicines is a fundamentally operational way for Samburu to seek control over normally uncontrollable events, utilizing the laibon's ability to reveal "unseen truths" and effect control over them through his supernaturally powerful remedies.

To Samburu participants (and to this anthropological observer), the laibon's divination and healing is a rational system, even if it uses nonrational

means (see introduction, this volume). This rationality is demonstrated socially, cognitively, and psychologically. At the level of social structure and function, the laibon's divination and healing serve both therapeutic functions (for example, the reduction of anxiety and psychological stress) and sociological functions (for example, the reestablishment of social order). People come to the laibon for a variety of problems—stress about a family illness, infertility in marriage, bad luck in love, or an inexplicable misfortune such as a cattle disease that affects one person's herd but not another's. Sometimes problems are manifested as psychosomatic pain or fatigue, sometimes as anxiety disorders, sleeplessness, or worry. Occasionally these problems are severe and may involve psychotic episodes—a mother cannot understand why her fifteen-year-old son rails against her with a machete blade, or a spouse remains mute, uncommunicative, and shut up in his or her house for days on end. As the laibon's divination unfolds, these problems are seen as the result of social conflicts within the family—jealousy of a brother's success or, in the case of the fainting girl, tension about a husband's previous lover.⁵

Victor Turner, drawing on his classic studies of rites of affliction among the Ndembu of Zambia, described the importance of revealing social tensions as a means of combating sorcery acts in the healing process: "It seems that the Ndembu doctor sees his task less as curing an individual patient than as remedying the ills of a corporate group. The sickness of a patient is mainly a sign that 'something is rotten' in the corporate body. The patient will not get better until all the tensions and aggressions in the group's interrelations have been brought to light and exposed to ritual treatment" (Turner 1964:262).

The effectiveness of the laibon's divination and medicines lies not in his confirmation that the person is ill (this is already known); rather, it is his validation of the internal conflicts a client and his family are undergoing, and the fact that these conflicts have their root in a larger social drama. This reduces the feelings of helplessness, alienation, and powerlessness that may be the cause of the health problem, which, in the case of the fainting girl, were probably rooted in depression and psychosomatization). By taking seriously the ailments presented by the client, the laibon promotes self-respect in the patient and enlists respect and protection of her and the wider family (and, at the very least, dissuades further beating of the girl).

Peek (1991:11–12) has pointed out that divination embodies a society's epistemology, but it does so through its own particular semantic structures

and shared meanings, providing both a way of knowing and a way of thinking. In linguistic terms, divination as practiced by the Samburu laibon has an internal logic and structure that the laibon, and to some degree the participants in the divination, understand. The laibon interprets the cast stones according to a particular grammar consisting of three components: the number of items thrown (n), the type of individual items thrown (i), and the configuration of the items thrown (c). The interpretation (I) of the divination throw is based on the composite of the meaning of the quantity thrown (Mn), the meaning of the type of individual objects thrown (Mi), and the meaning of the geometric configuration of the stones once thrown (Mc). The laibon's reading of the stones, or interpretation, is based on a combination of recognizing the meaning of each of these three components, where

$$I = [(Mi)] + [(Mn)] + [(Mc)]$$

However, the laibon has the option of disregarding or refusing to disregard elements in the composition of i , n , or c , or even the entire category, such as (Mc) , so that the brackets are optional. The laibon may focus only on the quantity of items thrown, or even on only one or two objects in the quantity.⁶ By understanding at least the meaning of the number (n) thrown and the item (i) thrown, the laibon's clients participate in the divination's unfolding and its revelations and thus both the laibon's abilities and the message that is being communicated.

"Sometimes the stones lie," said Leaduma, suggesting that the stones are testing him in a dialogue and pressing him to dig deeper for the truth. While some may argue this is an escape mechanism that allows a laibon to commit errors, it actually allows the laibon to carry out his divination with further throws. Like the hunter interpreting animal tracks, he must look deeply into patterns that are obscured by wind, sun, moisture, and time.

Finally, the Samburu laibon needs to be located in the wider ethnography of African divination and healing systems. Unlike trance healing or spirit mediumship found among Bantu-speaking agricultural societies of Africa (Beattie and Middleton 1969; Janzen 1991), divination and healing among the Nilotic Samburu is neither an emotionally charged nor highly dramatic encounter. Neither the laibon nor his clients show much affect during the divination or healing procedures; they do not engage in crying, shaking, trance drumming, or dancing, as is found in spirit possession healing in other soci-

eties in Africa. Rather, the laibon's divination and healing have a cool, intellectual character to it, like an interview between a police officer and a crime victim, or a physician recording a patient's family history. In a comparative study of illness and healing between Kenyan herders and farmers, Robert Edgerton (1966, 1974) found a "pragmatic and rational" approach to psychiatric and somatic illness by Nilotic pastoralists, compared to the highly emotional and interventive actions taken by Bantu farmers. This comparison may be a bit essentialist—both Kamba farmers and Samburu pastoralists in Kenya may attribute illnesses and misfortune to supernatural causes, and both societies have healers capable of intervening with the supernatural world. Still, their approaches are different—one highly charged and dramatic, the other quiet and private. The institution of diviner-healer is shared by Samburu and Maasai with other Nilotic societies in Kenya and Sudan, including the Nuer, Dinka, Atuot, and Turkana. These societies are similar in that they are all pastoralist or agropastoralist, they are organized by decentralized segmentary lineage organizations, they have age-grade organizations of warriors, and they share beliefs in sorcery and the power of divination to determine it. As Burton (1991:44) describes for the Atuot of Sudan, "An interpretation of what Atuot see as an essential human proclivity, to seek to gain at another's expense or suffer misfortune because of some other's anti-social behavior, is fundamental to an understanding of Atuot divination."

Samburu believe misfortune and illness may result from the malevolence of other humans. The laibon's power of healing is based on his ability to predict the presence of supernatural danger and to prepare potent medicines that protect someone from their enemies, both mystical and mundane. The laibon is a sorcerer as well as a healer, one who can manipulate supernatural forces to effect personal ends (Fratkin 1991). The laibon is not like the Samburu herbalist who treats various illnesses such as stomachaches or fever with a large variety of plant preparations. The majority of these are potent and toxic, as the goal of their application is rapid expurgation and "cleansing" of the body (Fratkin 1996). The power of the laibon's treatments are not based on a plant's physical properties; rather, they are effective because the laibon and his patient share the same belief in the underlying cause of the illness or misfortune—that of sorcery poisons directed by someone who means them harm.

The laibon's *ntasim* is perceived to work through a similar mechanism as

sorcery, through the action of mystically powerful substances capable of acting on the health and welfare of living people. This shared cosmology between the laibon and his community is the basis of his healing powers. Samburu say if a person is suffering from sorcery, no medical hospital in the world can save them; only the laibon's medicines will work.

Laibons are controversial among Samburu and Maasai because of their ability to make sorcery poisons as well as curative *ntasim* medicines. As one Matapato Maasai remarked, "If we did not have *Lo'onkidong'i* (the lineage of laibons), we would not need *Loonkidong'i*" (Spencer 1988:221). Consequently, the laibon is an outsider to the normative community and its moral order and occupies an ambivalent social position in Samburu society. Laibons do not behave like other elders; they like to drink and are not afraid to abuse others in public, particularly other laibons. Their position as outsiders is noted in their appearance and behavior, such as wearing green or blue cloths (rather than white or red, as other elders wear), using odd rather than even numbers in their *ntasim* medicine, or wearing strange and frightening items such as crocodile's teeth on their necklaces. The laibon stands outside the moral community, an intermediary between the human community and the forces of the universe. He is a dangerous person, someone whose divination and medicines can protect against as well as manipulate the dangers of sorcery.

In spite of their unsavory reputation, laibons who have proven their powers in prediction through divination and healing are accepted by many Samburu communities, particularly in isolated regions where the hazards of disease, predation, drought, and enemy raids must be faced without police, clinics, or rapid transportation. As long as these conditions exist, it is unlikely that the Samburu will give up their beliefs in the power of the laibon for some time to come.

Notes

1. Maa belongs to the eastern Nilotic group of Sudanic languages in the Nilo-Saharan family of African languages (Greenberg 1955), and is spoken by approximately one million people, including the Maasai (350,000), Samburu (100,000), Chamus (15,000), El Molo (5,000), and Ariaal (12,000) of Kenya and the Maasai (150,000), Arusha (100,000) and Paraguyu (30,000) of Tanzania. All these societies have lai-

bons, with the exception of the Arusha, who are settled farmers, and the El Molo, a small fishing community living on Lake Turkana, Kenya. Related Nilotic groups, including the Turkana of Kenya and the Nuer of Sudan, also have diviners and, in the recent past, "prophets" who have assumed political leadership during periods of political conflict (Anderson and Johnson 1995; Evans-Pritchard 1956; Lamphear 1998).

2. For detailed histories of the Maasai and their laibons, see Berntsen 1979; Sobania 1993; Spencer 1988, 1991; Spear and Waller 1993; and Waller 1995.

3. I have previously argued (Fratkin 1979) that Samburu laibons never obtained the same level of political leadership as they did among the Maasai in the nineteenth century, due to the differences in the warrior age-set organization and residence patterns between the two societies. Among Maasai, warriors (*il-murran*) live in *manyattas* (large interclan warrior villages), free from the direct control of their lineage elders but subject to ritual leadership and guidance by strong laibons, as in the case of Mbatiany. Samburu warriors, on the other hand, do not live in warrior villages but stay close to their lineage-based settlements or in small livestock camps based on lineage identity. Consequently, the Samburu elders play a more direct role in supervising the warrior age sets and laibons play less of a politically significant role. Spencer (1998:173) suggests that the Maasai developed their elaborate warrior age-set organization and manyatta system after pushing south from the Samburu, which allowed the Maasai greater military flexibility for "predatory expansion" during the nineteenth century. Similarly, Lamphear (1998:87, cf. 97) argues that laibons assumed a greater political role among Maasai warriors with development of manyatta villages and wars during the nineteenth century.

4. Quoted from Evans-Pritchard (1956:304), who described prophets as "the mouthpieces of God" for the Nuer of Sudan. See Anderson and Johnson (1995) for distinction of prophets from diviners in East Africa.

5. My appreciation to my wife, Marty Nathan, M.D., for her insights into the therapeutic efficacy of the laibon's treatments, and to T. O. Lambo's (1964) contributions on the therapeutic milieu.

6. I am grateful to Dr. James Copeland, Department of Linguistics, Rice University, who helped me understand the grammar of the nkidong divination.