

Remarks on the position of human remains in the Neolithic graves at Kadero (Central Sudan)

The position of a corpse in a grave is the subject of interest for both archaeologists and physical anthropologists. There is no need to cite here the extensive and growing bibliography on this subject. Scholars seem to be particularly interested not only in the position of the human body in its grave pit but in the whole of the burial rite practised by "primitive" societies. Research on these phenomena is inevitably bound with religious beliefs.

It seems to the writer that the position of the corpse in the grave was connected with the corresponding beliefs about life after death which were shared by a given social group. The contracted position of the dead human body is a characteristic trait common to burial practices in many prehistoric societies. This position was also called "embryonal", which, according to some authors, suggested the belief in the close association between the phenomena of death and birth.

It seems that the Neolithic inhumations discovered at Kadero, 18 km to the north of Khartoum, provide an opportunity for further studies on the practice of laying the human corpse in a tightly contracted position into the grave pit. The Kadero burial ground is typical of the Central Sudanese Neolithic tradition and is dated to ca 5,300-5,100 B.P. The interred individuals belong to the local social group practicing pastoralism and some forms of food gathering (Krzyżaniak, 1978). In total, some 36 Neolithic graves containing the remains of 37 individuals have been found so far at this site (Dzierżykray-Rogalski, 1977; Promińska, this volume).

In spite of the generally poor state of preservation of the Kadero skeletal remains, due to their erosion, it was possible to note that in these Neolithic burials the corpses were laid on their sides (usually on the right side) in the grave pit, in most cases in an extremely contracted position. Their arms were bent at the elbow and placed on the chest so that the hands were very close to the face. The knees were drawn up in the front of the bend head (Fig. 1). From observations of these skeletons *in situ* the authors concluded that the tightly contracted position of the corpses could not have been obtained without previous preparation. Probably, immediately after death the



FIG. 1. Kadero. Neolithic graves Nos. 10 and 38

body was contracted and bound with a cord of twisted vegetable fibers and only then laid into the grave pit. The custom of burying human corpses in a tightly fitting container, such as a bag or basket, is also known to exist in some prehistoric cultures. In the opinion of the writer the custom of binding corpses may have been practised in the Kadero Neolithic inhumations.

Graves containing human remains resting in a contracted position were also found in other prehistoric cemeteries in Central Sudan, *e.g.* from such sites as Khartoum of the Early Khartoum (pre-Kadero) tradition (Arkell, 1949), and Omdurman and Esh Shaheinab of the Central Sudanese Neolithic (post-Kadero) tradition (Arkell, 1949; 1953).

It is interesting to note that till today no attention was drawn to the anatomical impossibility of achieving the degree of contraction, found in corpses at Kadero and other sites, without immediate post-mortem binding of the body.

Is such a tightly contracted position of the body in the grave pit the result of corresponding beliefs about the form of human life after death? The answer seems to be in the affirmative. One can assume that the intention of the people, burying the deceased member of their social group, was to immobilize the dead person in the grave pit. This may have been prompted by the belief that the dead could rise from the grave and harm the living.

In support of this assumption are the burial customs known from the Neolithic burial grounds in Poland (Stok, Las Stocki) where there are graves with heavy stones

laid upon the body presumably to immobilize the dead (Dzierżykraj-Rogalski, 1958; 1961). Putting stones into the mouth of the dead was also practised there.

This attempted explanation seems, however, to be inconsistent with the practise of furnishing the Neolithic burials at Kadero with grave goods, such as fine pottery vessels, stone mace-heads, tools and chipped stone implements which were in use by this social group. These objects may have been deposited in the grave to serve the dead in his further existence. But, perhaps, this practise was, also, intended to keep the dead away from the living members of a given social group?

Any attempt at explanation the contracted position of a human corpse in the grave pit should take into account not only the observations made by archaeologist and physical anthropologist in the field, but also the point of view of scholars working in such disciplines as theory of religion, cultural anthropology and ethnography. The ultimate aim will be an attempt to reconstruct the complex and poorly known sphere of religious beliefs of this Neolithic society and its burial customs.

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