

OFF-TOPIC PHOTO-ESSAY

RENATO BOCCASSINO

NORTHERN UGANDA, 1933-1934
edited by Antonello Ricci

ABSTRACT

The photographs presented here have been selected for the exhibition Birth and Death among the Acholi: Renato Boccassino's Photographs, 1933-1934 (October 18 - November 18, 2016) and are accompanied by the original exhibition captions. They are related to Antonello Ricci's article published in this issue. See also (in Italian and with a wider selection) www.academia.edu/31137371/le_fotografie_di_Renato_Boccassino_della_spedizione_tra_gli_acholi_in_uganda_prime_considerazioni_VOICI_2015.

KEYWORDS

Acholi, Exhibition, Ethnography, Photography, Uganda, Boccassino

RENATO BOCCASSINO

(1904-1976) was an Italian Ethnologist who was mainly active in the period between the two world wars and in the first decades after World War II. In those years his figure is related to a radical Catholic point of view in ethnology which was encouraged by the Vatican and was oriented by the German scholar Father Wilhelm Schmidt. From 1933 to 1934 Boccassino made a field research in Uganda among the Acholi people, in the Nile basin, producing many documents such as papers, photos, notebooks, letters. In 2006 these documents were donated to the Istituto centrale per il catalogo e la documentazione (ICCD) of the Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo by his daughter

Maria Boccassino and they constitute the Boccassino fund in the Gabinetto fotografico nazionale Archivio fotografico there.



Fotografia 1

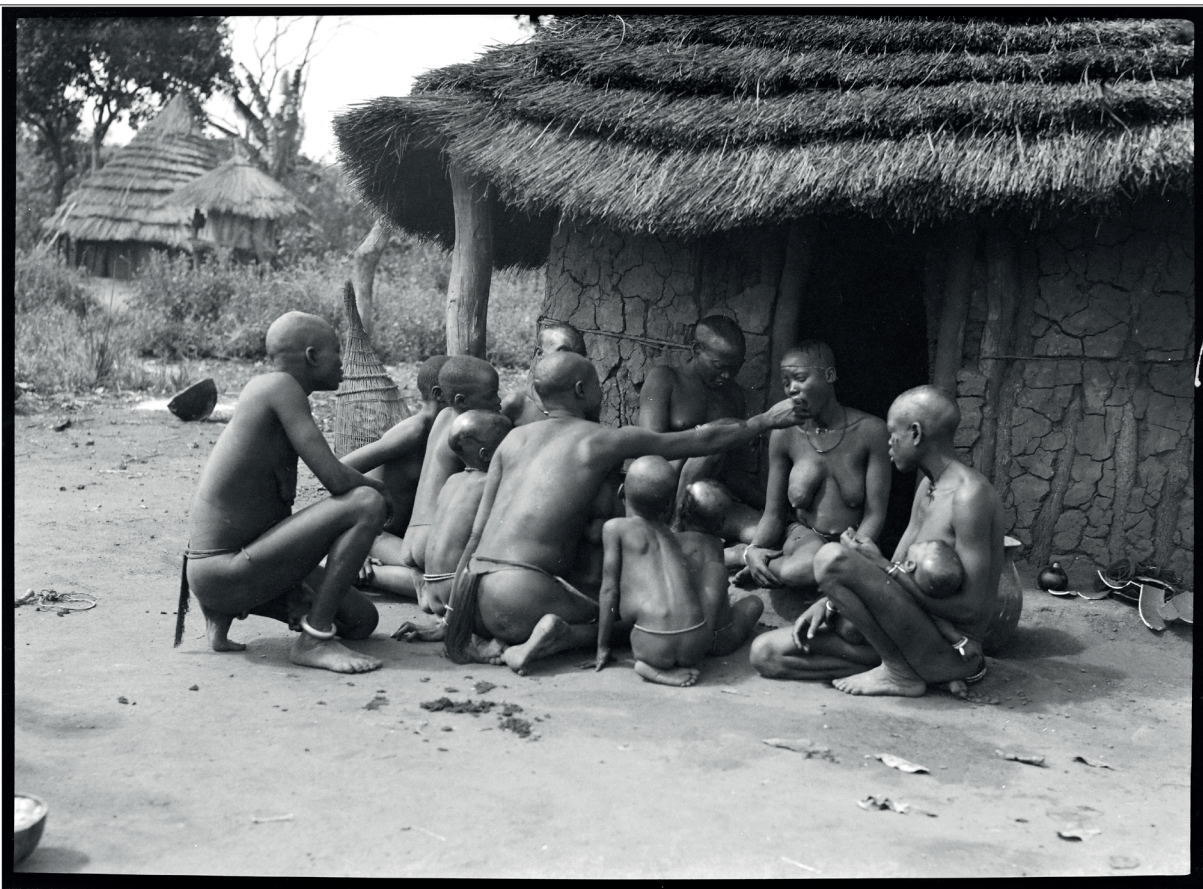
Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 222 - Mourning (a cord on the hips), gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000037). The photograph represents a woman dressed in mourning for the death of her son with a cord of vegetable fiber knotted under her navel. Behind her an *eyel* - the fence around the tomb - is particularly clear. The fences serve to protect the tomb in the first period of mourning and are maintained for a year. At the end of that period they are dismantled and the earth is smoothed over and spread with cow dung and water.

In this, as in all the other captions, the inventory number present on the negative is shown in *italics*, which can be seen in photo number 7, with the author's handwritten title from the back of the prints.



Fotografia 2

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 223b - End of mourning (beer is served), gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000039). Renato Boccassino (1973) describes the beer offering ceremony: “[...] On the evening of the third day after the burial, the women ferment the flour in water to prepare the beer that will be consumed ritually on the following day. This ceremony [...] closes the first cycle of funeral rituals that the Acioli call goro lyel = the gathering for funeral laments. [...] The beer drinking ceremony [...] begins with the second cycle of rituals that the Acioli call ketto lyel or ketto gango, expressions that mean: relaxation, end of mourning and cola, that is to say, return to being cheerful again. Those who bury the corpse [...] and the woman who took away the earth remained silent. As they approach the grave, the woman places a bowl containing beer close to the chest of the men inviting them three times to partake but they all refuse. Only after the fourth offer do they drink a sip and then even the woman drinks”.



Fotografia 3

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 233c - Ritual consumption of food and drink, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000050).

The ritual consumption of food, carried out according to a precise social code, is related to the blood ties. Boccassino (1973) synthesizes this custom:

“On the very day of burial and in the days of mourning, the relatives of the district arrive in the village to perform funeral lamentation near the tomb of the deceased; before returning home they all attend a common banquet, drink beer, and receive some of the ox killed for the banquet. They also offer meat and corn meal to the soul of the deceased; they also give me a piece of oxen meat, even though I am not a relative, but only a guest”.

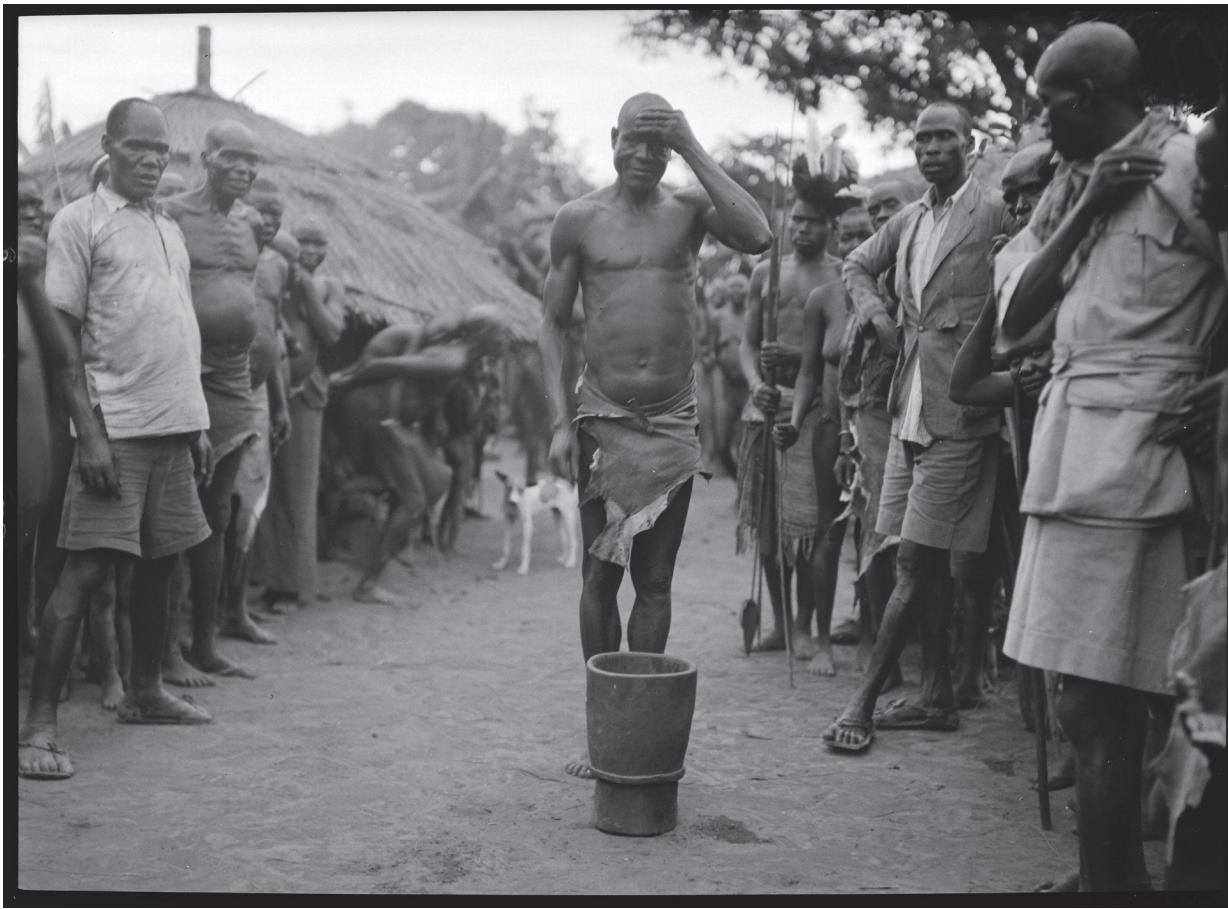
The photograph portrays a moment of funeral banquet as described by Boccassino (1973): “A woman puts a little bit of meat in the mouth of a relative of the deceased, probably his mother, in order that she eat and see the serious mourning he has had”.



Fotografia 4 e 5

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 232a - VI B 9 232b - The Unction of women and children with red color, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000046, RBN000047).

The two photographs, as well as the next, are drawn from a long series on the same subject. They depict one of the final moments of the funeral rite: relatives of the deceased sprinkle their body and that of some boys with a red ochre, oily ointment. In photo number 4, on the right of the entrance of the hut, you can notice the remains of a vessel which was broken during the burial.



Fotografia 6

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 234b - Unction at the end of the funeral ceremony, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000052).



Fotografia 7

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 3 140a - Twins, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000001).

The first photograph of the series "Exceptional Births" shows a mother with twins in her lap, leaning on one of the village granary, surrounded by other children. In the margin there is an inventory number written on the surface of the negative in Boccassino's hand.

Mythical aspects, ritual forms, and social behaviors concerning twins are commonly found in ethnographic literature. The birth of twins is not always perceived in the same way: sometimes it is considered a sign of divine grace, other times the opposite is held, in any case the event must be subjected to some form of ritual treatment. Among the Acioli the birth and death of twins gives rise to specific practices, as can be seen in the following series of photographs.



Fotografia 8

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 3 140b - Twins (Photo Father Giuseppe Pasquale Crazzolaro), gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000002).

The mother of twins puts her children in Renato Boccassino's lap. This, together with other photographs in the Boccassino Collection, was taken by Father Giuseppe Pasquale Crazzolaro (1884-1976) - a Combon missionary in Africa, originally from San Cassiano (BZ) - who was in Uganda the same year as Boccassino and shared the camp with him. He studied ethnography and linguistics, working on grammar and dictionaries of various indigenous African languages, including an Acioli/English grammar and vocabulary published in Oxford in 1938. The daughter of the ethnologist, Maria Boccassino, possesses an Acioli/German grammar and dictionary of Father Crazzolaro; among the materials found in the Collection, there is an Achioli/English dictionary of 21 typed pages.



Fotografia 9 e 10

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 3 151a - VI B 3 151g - Blessing the women and children in the ceremony, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000021, RBN000023).

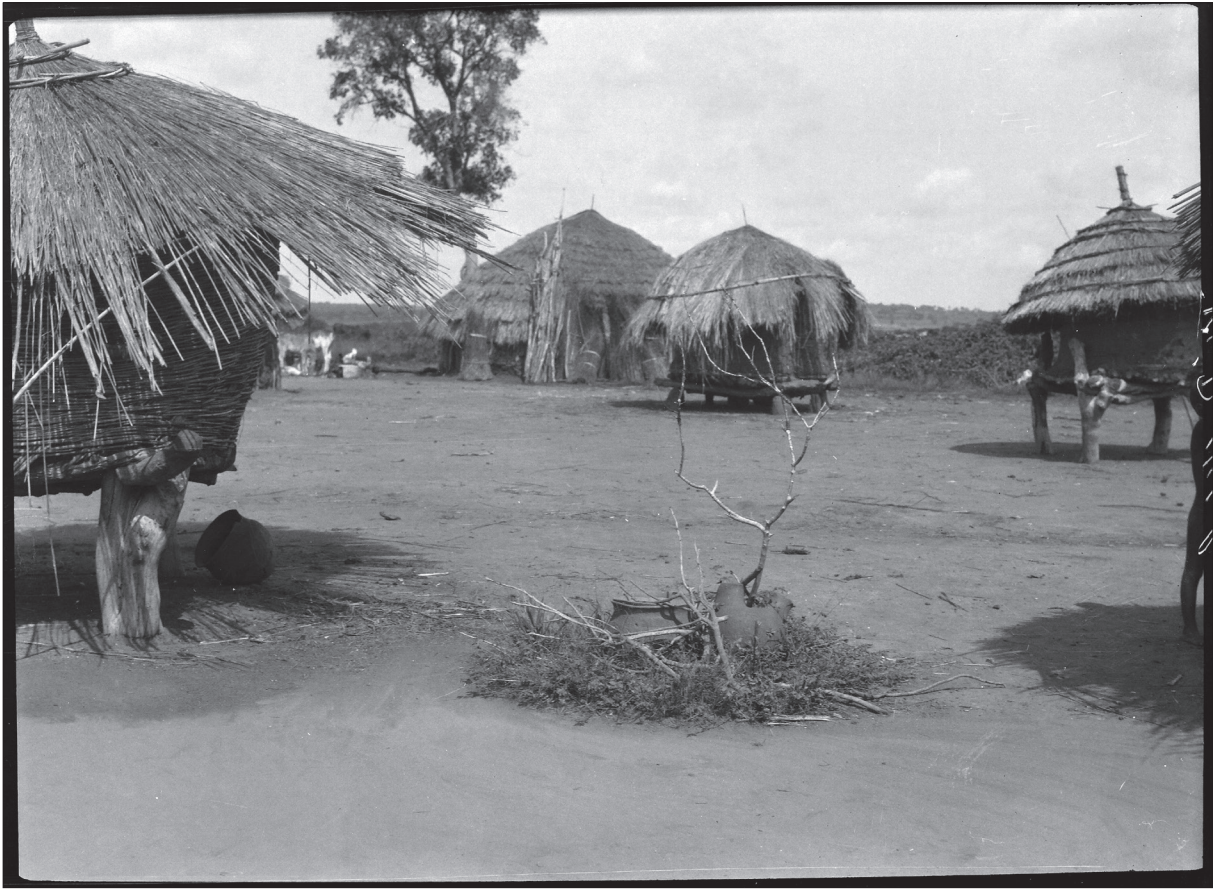
During the ceremony associated with birth, ritual acts of various kinds are performed; the umbilical cord is buried under a mound prepared of plant material similar to that of the funeral; around this altar ritual songs are performed which are different for single births or for twins; ritually sacrificed animals (chickens or sheep) are placed over where the umbilical cord is buried; the intestines of sacrificed sheep are first observed and then roasted; during the ceremony some people are coloured white; at the end, infants and their mothers undergo a form of blessing and take of food which had been prepared during the ceremony.



Fotografia 11

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 3 154 - Vessel for the twins, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000027).

The vessel shown in the photo is used for rituals related to the birth or the death of twins. In a 1963 article on the material culture of Acioli, Boccassino published a photograph of a similar vessel: "Kirubu. Pot with two 23 cm. high openings. Each is 12,5 cm. in diameter. It is considered an object of worship because it is used only in the sacrifices made on the occasion of the birth of twins [...]. In another pot which is almost exactly the same as the one represented in this figure [...] the two mouths are so close that at one point they touch".



Fotografia 12

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 3 1411 – Tomb of the twins, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000009).

The tombs are made up of plant material of various kinds and at their base were placed objects which belonged to the deceased. Noteworthy are the recipients that had been used while the deceased was living for drinking and eating. The tomb depicted in the photograph was that of a twin, as evidenced by the two-mouthed receptacle seen at the base. Burials are located near the houses or, as in this case, near the granary and in the early period of mourning the tombs are surrounded by fences. In an article in 1973, Boccassino reports: "It is common among the Acioli to throw away, or rather, that is to say throw on the tomb the objects that most served the deceased [...]. This violent, ritual act is called *bolo agulu wi lyel* = (breaking of the pots on the grave). During a burial I approached near to the tomb to better follow and photograph the ritual but as soon as the pit was covered, they hurled objects over it, including a squash gourd, a bowl that broke into multiple pieces, shattering upwards in different directions; and one piece, dry and sharp, brushed my hand and the lens of my camera".



Fotografia 13, 14 e 15

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 216a - VI B 9 216b - VI B 9 216c - The burial of a child, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000032, RBN000033, RBN000034).

These photographs and the following are part of a sequence created by Renato Boccassino on the actual burial of a child, protagonist, in life, of other images taken by the ethnologist documenting the relationship between alternate generations. The child, in fact, helped his blind grandmother in all her affairs: some of the photographs portray him in the act of assisting her. The sequence is commented on by Bocassino (1973): "The habit of digging a grave near the hut is widespread. [...] The old grandmother, almost blind, looks deeply at those who dig the graves, then, crawling slowly reaches her grandson's grave and sits next to it to be with him. [...] Notice the fenced eye, which surrounds another tomb in the village".



Fotografia 16

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 217 - The Burial of a child (Payco): then the cleansing of hands over the grave, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN0000035).

The ritual ablutions of the hands and feet during the funeral ceremony are repeated continuously to avoid the possible contamination of the participants of the burial. Boccassino adds that dropping the water which has washed the hands on the disturbed ground helps in consolidating it, and so completes the operation appropriately.



Fotografia 17

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 224b - The killing of a goat with knees and elbows to avoid contamination, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000040).

This photo and the next three are part of a very long, articulate and detailed sequence. Boccassino writes (1973): "The first day after the death of a deceased, relatives from other villages continue to come to perform funeral laments [...]; the second, third and fourth day after the death are important for the sacrifice of a goat that includes many elements of manism [...]. The sacrifice of a goat is part of a ceremony of purification to destroy the harmful consequences of the impurity that emanates from the corpse."



Fotografia 18

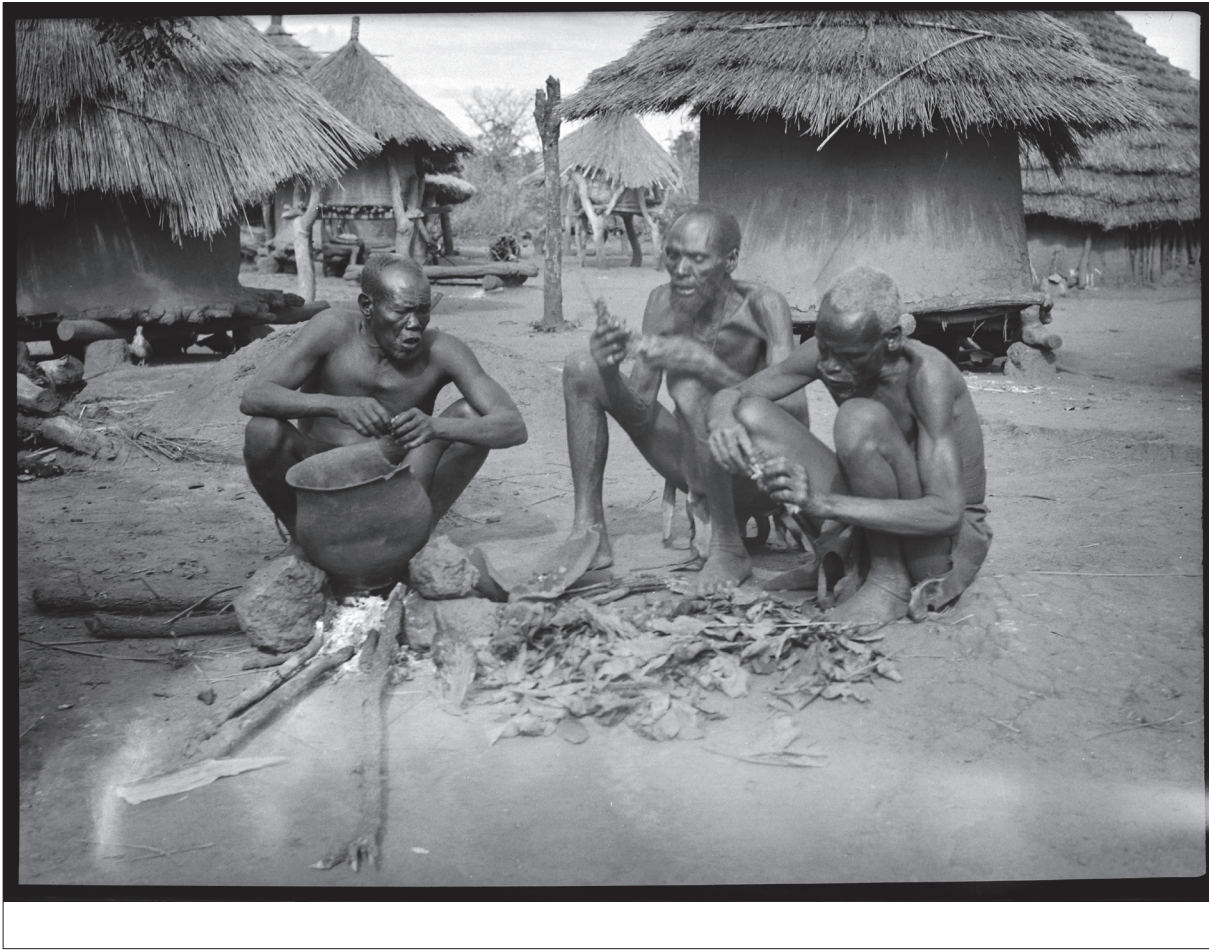
Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 225b - The killing of a goat with a stick, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000041). Boccassino (1973): "The second day after death, a brother of the deceased gives him a sacrificed goat, which can be replaced by a hen if there are no goats in the village [...]. In Pabo and in various other districts, the victim is quickly killed with the stroke of a stick".



Fotografia 19

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 227b - Kneeling over the goat, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000042).

“At Pajole and Puranga the goat must die slowly. It is suffocated near the tomb by repeatedly and forcibly pressing its neck and chest with the elbows and knees”. Describing the beliefs about the contagion which stems from the impurity of the corpse, cola, Boccassino (1973) writes: “An elder from Puranga explained to me their thoughts on cola: ‘Our ancestors have told us that if those who have buried a deceased don’t sacrifice a goat, by suffocating it with their knees on the grave, they will be infected by the disease caused by cola. Cola is a shadow of which we do not see the body [...], it is an impurity that enters the body of men and ruins it [...]’”.



Fotografia 20

Northern Uganda, 1933-1934. VI B 9 230 - Cooking the goat, gelatin silver, cm. 9x12, ICCD GFN Archivio fotografico, Fondo Boccassino (RBN000044).

Boccassino (1973): "The elderly people who had contact with the corpse when they buried him cut the goat's meat into pieces and boil it in a pot, on a fire near the grave. On the same fire they also cook corn meal made with the flour, which was in the hut of the deceased. This ritual meal is taken in silence only by those who had buried the corpse".



Fotografia 21 e 22

Roma, November 11, 2016. Alberto Sobrero with his students (photo Antonello Ricci).