

## **SISTER REBECCA: KENYAN DAKTARI YA WATU, WANYAMA NA MTU YA DUKA (DOCTOR, VETERINARIAN AND SHOPKEEPER)**

**By Cynthia Brewer  
The Catholic Lighthouse**

Living in the bush country of Kenya, that is home to warring African tribes, would frighten most people, particularly a woman living alone for a period of 10 days per month -- but not Sister Rebecca Janacek, a petite, fair-skinned woman, 56 years of age, and a member of the congregation of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament in Victoria.

Rather than being fearful of living with the Pokot people and the neighboring tribes with whom they fight, no longer with spears, bows and arrows, but with automatic AK-47 assault rifles that have trickled in from countries fighting civil wars, she fears a lack of clean water, passable roads and medicine for the people she serves.

Sister Rebecca, a registered nurse, has been ministering to the Pokot people of the Pokot district in northwest Kenya since 1987, and speaks both the Pokot and Swahili languages.

The people are pastoralists; their lives depend on their cattle and goats, thus the battle with AK-47s to protect their livelihood from cattle rustlers -- a notorious problem. The Pokot territory, an arid and forgotten land, encompasses 693 square miles, an area approximately 10 by 60 miles with a population of about 15,000. The family unit is patriarchal with the men practicing polygamy, having several wives. The large families live remotely in two to three wood or mud, round huts encircled as one homestead (manyatta) to provide protection.

Sister Rebecca's home base is in Barpello, E. Pokot, Kenya, where she works with seven other religious -- two priests and five sisters -- at the Kenya Foundation of the Mexico City Incarnate Word Sisters, which now also include native Sisters, and the Victoria Community of the Incarnate Word. Barpello, the established mission, is about 12 hours northwest of the Kenyan capital city of Nairobi, and 30 miles (four hours) from the Rotu Mission.

In an effort to multiply the foundation's health programs, Sister Rebecca spent from January to September 2006 conducting a needs assessment to determine the most important needs of the Pokot people. She and two lads with secondary educations conducted the assessment. She and each lad, for a week at a time, would travel by foot from one round hut to another, each with their own tent, collecting data about the resources and population, before returning to Barpello.

At the time, all water collection was done by the women carrying two to five gallon containers on their backs, from one-half mile to 20 miles from their homes. Collection can occur from one to four times daily depending on the season and closeness of the water points. This hardship caused women to have spontaneous abortions and children were left in the care of older children while mothers were away. To reach basic health care facilities it could take from two to five days walking through the bush.

From this process, she and the Pokot people concluded that access to clean water, healthcare, food and education were their most important needs. Three stations were selected to receive water wells: Rotu, Chesawach and Chesettim, each about 15 miles from the other. Wells have already been established in Rotu and Chesawach, and a medical mission has been built in Rotu.

“Unfortunately, they have not found water at Chesettim,” said Sister Rebecca. “However, the water assessment says there’s a huge amount of water, but we have to find the fissure in the volcanic rock, and the well will have to be very deep. We just don’t have the money to continue this project at this time.”

The cost for each well -- drilling, equipping with solar powered pumps, storage tanks and hand pumps -- is between \$48,000 and \$58,000, depending on the depth. The solar powered pumps provide water for the health units and the hand pumps for the people and their livestock.

Sister Rebecca requires the native people using the water wells to pay for some of the more expensive parts of the hand pumps, in this way they have some ownership, “Each family makes their payment by the sale of one, big goat at the December market. This way they also help fund the upkeep of the well.”

The medical unit at Rotu has passed inspection by the Kenyan government; they’re only waiting for the paperwork to be officially licensed. The goal with this unit, as well as all future medical units (Chesettim and Chesawach), is to have four professional people experienced in health care, community development and financial management to eventually be able to manage their own independent health units at each of these stations.

“I want the government to provide us nurses. Hopefully by October we’ll have a couple of nurses in Rotu,” Sister Rebecca said. “Ideally, each station will also have a hostel with nine rooms including a dining and sitting area, where the nurses will stay, using their government housing stipend, and visitors may rent an overnight stay; therefore, it should become a means of generating income for the health unit.”

While home in Victoria in June and July this year, Sister Rebecca received a generous donation to build the hostel at the Rotu unit. She is hopeful that by next year the Rotu station will be fully established so they don’t have to rely on the mobile clinics.

Because of the extremely poor road conditions, the mobile clinics that normally come once monthly have been unable to come for the past 10 months. Children have missed their vaccinations.

“This place is totally neglected by the government because it is so far away, has such bad roads, and there is so much violence.”

Some of Sister Rebecca’s principal troubles come from the corrupt and slow government in Nairobi. Because of the cattle rustling and the AK-47s replacing the more traditional weapons it’s so dangerous that even the Kenyan military stays out, she said.

The roads are the responsibility of the government, and Sister Rebecca spends much time and energy reminding them of their promises and responsibilities. Basically the promise is: “We’ve got the money, you do the work.” The government has the money and is supposed to provide medicines and see that she can access the people through good roads while she has the time and skill to provide health care for the people.

She warned the government that she’d be gone for two months (visiting home in Texas), and expected the roads to be repaired by the time she got back. Eventually they listen to her because they know how valuable she is to them.

While at the Rotu Mission of a couple of buildings, which is situated similarly to the family homesteads, Sister Rebecca is on her own and alone for 10 days at a time. She is able to drive there from Barpello in her brand new truck, which came from donors.

In Rotu her many skills are utilized: she provides for anyone sick, human or animal; works on the water wells (which she designed); from her little shop, she sells sugar, tea, salt, soap and animal medicines; and from the native people she buys honey that one of the sisters in Barpello sells at market. The majority of the Pokots get their money through the sale of their livestock at markets.

Because they're on the equator, day and night are equally 12 hours. She finds a lot of peace at the mission once shoppers and water collectors leave to beat sundown at 7 p.m. Sister Rebecca says she is safe when alone because she's the people's "Daktari." Even the "enemy" tribes respect her. She said, "They all know I would also help them if they needed medical attention; in fact I have helped other tribe members."

The missions bring health and education to the people, but religious missions should also bring the good news of Jesus Christ. Sister Rebecca said that at their home mission in Barpello, with the help of God, they've established an active faith community, "Fifty to 60 Pokots have received baptism and some of the other sacraments and attend Sunday Mass, while an additional 100 to 150 also come to each Sunday Mass to worship with the others. All their services are in the Pokot language."

As far as in the bush, the new areas, they have not yet established faith communities. They're just trying to lay the ground work -- the pre-evangelization," she said.

Sister Rebecca's ministry is in the healing ministry; whereas, the teaching Sister's and the priests' ministry are in evangelization and in teaching the faith.

"The Sisters take about nine years before asking about the peoples' faith/gods. They ask and then, eventually, the native people begin to ask who our 'god' is. But in Rotu, they're already asking about our faith," she said. "I'm asking the priests to hurry and come do the evangelizing; the people are ready."

The reason Sister Rebecca is able to serve the Pokot people is because of donors from throughout the world: mostly the United States, Ireland and Italy. Donations from the United States come mainly from the Diocese of Victoria and the Archdiocese San Antonio, especially from where her family lives. Her new truck came by saving donations for four to five years from a combination of many people. She also has a core group of anonymous donors on which her mission relies. Even smaller donations help, "The children from Catholic schools help with their penny collections," she said, "and they know a lot about our mission."

To help Sister Rebecca financially, please make checks out to the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament (IWBS) and earmark the funds for Sr. Rebecca's water well/health project. Mail to Sister Evelyn Korenek at IWBS Convent, 1101 N.E. Water Street, Victoria, Texas 77901.

Also, please remember to pray for Sister Rebecca and the Pokot people.