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TRANSITION ON THE TANA:  
SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IN A KENYAN PASTORAL SOCIETY

by

DAVID A. McCLELLAND

A THESIS

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I hereby grant permission to my graduate student, Mr David McClelland to reproduce as a part of his thesis an altered version of a map which I have drawn for my own instructional purposes of the Peoples of Kenya. The map is altered by having the location of the Orma people indicated on it. (pg. 131)

Yours sincerely,

Dr D. G. Hatt,  
Associate Professor,  
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Transition on the Tana: Socio-Economic Change in a Kenyan Pastoral Society" submitted by David A. McClelland in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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## Abstract

The most recent estimate is that thirty to forty million pastoralists endeavour to eke out a living in the arid and semi-arid zones which cover some 35 per cent of the land surface of the world (Sandford 1983: 2). Of this grand total about half live in Africa, mostly in the Sahel and in the Horn. There is fairly extensive ethnographic documentation on the majority of these pastoral nomads especially those of Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia. Studies of the Maasai, Turkana, Borana, Somali, Rendille and Samburu have become classics in the anthropological literature. This thesis seeks to provide ethnographic documentation on another, less well-known, East African pastoral group called the Orma.

The Orma are an anomaly in the ethnography of Kenya's people because, with the exception of some very early traveller accounts, little has been written about them. This is odd for two reasons. The first is that, even though they inhabit arid lands, they are fairly accessible. Secondly, they are an interesting group for study as they have been cut off from their Oromo kinsmen and their homelands for over seventy-five years yet retain a strong Oromo identity even though they now aspire to live in much the same fashion as their non-Oromo neighbors.

The Orma have survived and flourished in the arid zones of north-eastern Kenya until the last twenty years or so. They have always suffered from droughts and famines but prior to the twentieth century they have always managed to restore their pastoral economies, even if after acute hardships, and maintained their culture fairly intact. But now, despite great inputs of aid and development funds, with modern transport networks and technical and medical facilities, and with all the international humanitarian concern many of the Orma are hungry and food-dependent and their traditional lifestyle seriously threatened.

This study attempts to sort out the processes which have brought the Orma to this point by documenting how their integration into wider political and economic contexts, a

devastating war, and unusually harsh climatic conditions have changed the opportunity structure of the diversified sections of Orma society, thereby leading to a more marked internal social differentiation. The emphasis is mainly on the expression of these forces at the local level rather than on the nature of the forces as such. In this way, it is hoped that this thesis will serve as a useful case-study of socio-economic change in a livestock-oriented society.

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And finally, I am indebted to those Orma with whom I had contact. In times of great hardship and strife they were always willing to help me understand a little of their way of life. It is to them that this thesis is dedicated.

## Introduction

A hot, dry wind blew in from the desert as Jaldessa brought his small flock of sheep and goats to the banks of the Tana River. The animals were parched and drank greedily from the greenish-brown waters. "It has not rained for a very long time. It is the rainy season now and still nothing. It is very bad." I listened and nodded my head in acknowledgement as Jaldessa lamented the fact that his animals were beginning to die. Shielding my eyes from a blast of sand, I felt sad for Jaldessa but considered myself fortunate to have come across him: He was an Orma and, when we first met, appeared to be enthusiastic about my intention to study his people.

There is surprisingly little ethnographic data on the Orma. Indeed, most references to this group appear as secondary comments or as footnotes and personal anecdotes. While copious amounts of information continue to be collected on the other Kenyan pastoral peoples such as the Maasai, Rendille, Samburu, and Turkana, the Orma have been virtually overlooked. Even when their fellow Oromiyya-speaking Borana, Wollo, and Tulema kinsmen had been studied quite thoroughly, the Orma remained practically unmentioned in the ethnographic record. They remain the only Oromo-speaking people whose social organization and institutions have not been documented by fieldwork by more than one investigator.

The classical hallmark of Oromo studies had always been the age- and generation-grading *gada* system and my original intention in research was to record how this system manifested itself in this particular Oromo society. Such a study would have proven interesting, since the Orma had effectively been separated from their homelands and ritual centers since the beginning of this century by the intrusive Somali. I expected to come across a belief system presently in a state of transition yet retaining core cultural values that would have enabled the Orma to exhibit characteristics that were still recognizably "Oromo". This tendency has been documented among those Oromo societies of Ethiopia

even though they were under similar pressures to those which are now being exerted on the Orma from the Christianized Amhara and Tigrean peoples for much larger stretches of time.

It was by the river that day when I asked Jaldessa about the *gada* system. He replied, to my surprise, that he did not know of such pagan things and that the Orma had always been Muslim. As my stay in Ormland extended there were other such surprises. I was faced with having to make sense out of what I was observing. It became evident that a study of the Orma would not be what I had originally intended. Instead of documenting certain aspects of their traditional ritual system undergoing change, my study would describe the complete transformation of Orma society.

Having said this, it is important to bear in mind that this thesis is intended only as a preliminary survey of the internal and external forces acting upon Orma society and of their subsequent responses. I try to show what is happening in Ormland today and to discern the direction in which the Orma appear headed. I value being honest and, where necessary, I speculate and assume rather than generate a model that explains everything. The time I spent in the field was simply not long enough to say anything more. As a result, I do not claim to possess a comprehensive knowledge of traditional and contemporary Orma society. Rather, I present this thesis as an exploratory study and as a first step in what I hope will be much more detailed research in the future.

Of the ten head of small stock that Jaldessa had by the river that day, three were sold and the money used to purchase maize, two were slaughtered and consumed as they were near death, and the two youngest died. The drought conditions were too harsh to withstand. No longer a viable flock that could reproduce and regenerate itself, the remaining animals were loaned to a brother while Jaldessa sought wage employment. A few days after he secured a job as a casual labourer on a road crew near Lamu the rains finally came. Three days later, due to flooding, all road work was suspended and Jaldessa came back. When I last saw him he was standing in a queue in the rain waiting for a food relief handout.

## Chapter One

### Background Information

There is one half of Kenya about which the other half knows nothing and seems to care even less.

Negley Farson, **Last Chance in Africa**

This thesis is based upon information collected during a three month anthropological field study in the Tana River and Garissa Districts of north-eastern Kenya through the period February to May, 1988. The people with whom the study is concerned are a Muslim, Eastern-Cushitic speaking people called the Orma.

#### Intent of the Study

In comparison to other East African pastoralists, the Orma have always been relatively accessible yet virtually nothing is known of them. The little that we do know of pre-colonial Orma society speaks of fearless, powerful and mobile warriors with little interest other than taking the genitals of their enemies as spoils of war. Then, in the mid-19th century, and for no apparent reason, they disappear as an effective force on the East African scene. Orma oral traditions recount deep animosities vis-a-vis the neighboring Somali yet today, paradoxically, many Orma aspire to be just like these enemies. Perhaps, this is the greatest contradiction: the Orma pride themselves on belonging to a nomadic, warrior tradition yet they envy the sedentary Somali shopkeepers.

The aim of this thesis is to attempt to make sense of these various contradictions and to sort out the processes which have brought the Orma to this point by documenting how their integration into wider political and economic contexts has changed the opportunity-structure of the diversified sections of Orma society thereby leading to a more marked internal social differentiation. The concept of "change" is important here for Orma have undergone considerable changes in their traditional and contemporary lifestyles.

This study documents the effects of colonialism, independent national integration and an expanding market economy on the local scene. An illustration of the micro-level consequences of change will be given by presenting a picture of domestic lifestyles in both the small market towns and in the pastures. I shall pay particular attention to the way in which wealthy families have bridged the gap between town life and the nomadic pastures and the way towns serve as a "last resort" for impoverished ex-pastoralists. The position of this group, who suffer not only from being members of a marginal society, but also from being marginalized in relation to that society, will be elaborated. In addition, I will discuss the position of the Orma community in a wider Kenyan context both today and in the future and this will lead to a more general consideration of change in pastoral societies. The emphasis here will be mainly on the expression of these forces at the local level rather than on the nature of the forces as such. In this way, it is hoped that this thesis will serve as a useful case-study of socio-cultural change in a livestock-oriented society, for many of the problems encountered by the Orma are common to a wider category of pastoral people who see their resource bases being diminished through the intervention of external forces.

In this context, the arena of small market towns is particularly important, for new opportunities are often centered in such places. Change too often tends to be viewed as something deliberately introduced by agents higher in the power hierarchy and is therefore either stubbornly rejected or graciously accepted at the local level. And, all too often, pastoralists have tended to be seen as passive recipients or rejectors of change. Nevertheless, market expansion and "development" always bring new resources into the local scene, where actors within the pastoral society make active use of them.

Hence, the present study is not restricted to the ethnically "pure" areas of Tana Ormland but also covers the semi-urban aspects of their socio-ecological world. Any attempt to distinguish between groups which might be termed more or less "traditional" or to establish regional boundaries within the Tana society as a whole would be both arbitrary

and artificial and would divert attention from the dynamics of social life and processes of change affecting it.

### A Pastoral People

The Orma are heir to an ancient culture that had its beginnings in pre-Christian times and share generic features with the ancient Semitic tribes described in the Old Testament (Goldschmidt 1986: 1, see also Karp & Bird 1980). The basic economy of this ancient culture is what anthropologists call *pastoralist*: that is, the people are dependent on raising livestock for subsistence - cattle, sheep and goats in varying proportions, supplemented in some areas with camels, donkeys, or both (see Lefebure 1979: 2-5, Dyson-Hudson's 1980: 17-18). The animals consume the natural grasses and foliage, which entails that the flocks and herds must be constantly moved to where grass, water, and salt are available. In turn, this means that their owners are also living a non-sedentary lifestyle. The amount of movement, whether it is almost daily or only seasonal, depends on local conditions, but the people cannot remain long in one place before the available food supply is consumed by their animals. Such people are designated in the anthropological literature as *nomadic pastoralists*. Though nomadism in some degree is always necessary, there are home camps in which various amounts of cultivation are engaged. In addition, there are traditional settled populations who exchange their agricultural surpluses for the pastoral products of the nomads. In this way, a symbiosis and complementarity of sorts is achieved. The actual mixture and relative importance of livestock and grain varies as local conditions change, but normally all these items, in some degree, are part of the basic inventory of economic resources.

While every pastoral nomadic group is unique, they nevertheless are faced with broadly similar situations of economic choice and hence certain social features are general among them. For the pastoral nomads of East Africa most important among these are features of the ecological adaptation to the arid plains environment. In addition to dependency upon

livestock, the secondary use of crops, and a nomadic way of life may be added: the importance of both milk and blood in the diet; the use of wild honey; a taboo on the consumption of fish <sup>1</sup>; the use of iron for spears, which means also the craft of smithing; and round leather shields, which suggest that they engaged in warfare. The use of cowrie shells and of metal adornments are probably later innovations but are also widespread among them, as is the manufacture of reed mats and containers (Badawy 1988: personal communication). In their social organization are also some universal features: the reckoning of descent through the male line and masculine control of cattle (though women milk the cows), polygyny (that is men being allowed to take several wives) and bride payments in the form of livestock. The people are organized into lineages or clans (patrilineal descent groups whose members consider one another as kin) and these are expected to give mutual support in legal disputes and other confrontations. There are no hereditary chiefs and rarely any centralized political organization.

Indeed, it is this last point that the present people under discussion, and their Oromo kinsmen, are famous in the literature for. The most characteristic single feature of traditional Oromo social organization is the age-grading system. Age-grading, whether formally marked by a rite of passage or merely tacitly recognized, is probably universal, and gives the process of aging a social impress. But age-grading or generation-setting - the grouping of persons who are either close in age or of the same generation into a structure of hierarchically ordered sets which are vested with a diffuse range of social and ritual responsibilities - is an unwieldy, almost bizarre mode of social organization (Baxter & Almagor 1978: 2). It follows that all men belong to one of several age-sets that themselves as sets form a kind of hierarchy, with the age sets of senior elders at the top, followed by those of junior elders, senior warriors, junior warriors, and the young boys. The details of

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<sup>1</sup> This particular custom is more pronounced among the Cushitic peoples of the Horn of Africa than among other pastoral peoples; indeed it is very nearly a cultural marker of the Cushites.

this social system vary among Oromo and other pastoral groups, but everywhere they share these features: (1.) the unit age-sets are strongly bonded groups of men who owe one another special respect and allegiance; (2.) each set moves as a unit from one social status to another with the passage of time; and (3.) the age-grading system yields a hierarchical structure based on the principle of age seniority. Men are inducted into the system through an initiation process in which they are indoctrinated with the values of the community and in which the lessons are intensified through circumcision (see Bernardi 1985: 73-94).

To summarize, in pre-colonial times, Orma society was characterized by such divisions based on age but the divisions appear to have fallen out of use at least forty to fifty years ago.

Finally, there is the matter of warfare. The masculine orientation of cattle-keeping peoples is probably associated with the dangers inherent in herding livestock in a landscape where lions, leopards and other predators constitute an ever-present threat. But livestock is also subject to another kind of predation - raiding by enemy groups. It is for this purpose that the age-grade system, which bonds together the able-bodied young men into collaborative teams, is so important. Such young men will not be content merely to protect their herds from others, but they will also initiate raids themselves. So a pattern of inter-tribal warfare, normally in the form of localized raids and counter-raids, but capable of escalating to major conflicts, is an important feature of life on the plains of East Africa.

Now that a generalized picture of Cushitic nomadism has been drawn it becomes necessary to detail specific aspects of the Oromo- or Galla-speaking peoples.

### The Oromiyya- or Galla-Speaking Peoples

The Orma are part of the much larger Oromiyya- (or Galla-) speaking peoples who inhabit Ethiopia and northern Kenya and who are, in turn, a major branch of the Cushitic-speaking peoples, the predominant linguistic group of northeast Africa (see Map 7). The most recent estimate is that there are around twelve and a half million Oromiyya-speakers in

Ethiopia, and that Oromos make up approximately 40 per cent of the population of the country (Pankhurst et al. 1983). More people speak Oromiyya as their native tongue than speak Amharic, the language of government. In Kenya, there are well over one hundred thousand Oromiyya-speakers and some are to be found in Somalia as well (Baxter 1986: personal communication). Oromo linguistic and cultural boundaries, like those of most nations (or "nationalities" as they are called in Ethiopia), are both fuzzy and permeable, but in almost every circumstance of daily life they are clear enough to the actors themselves, and Oromo identity and consciousness are becoming increasingly important political givens in Ethiopia.

The Oromo, in the sense of all the Oromiyya-speaking peoples, taken together are thus one of the most numerous peoples of Africa. Like so many African peoples their contemporary sense of being one nation and their search for a common cultural identity, are, in part, products of their experiences as colonial subjects. There is some evidence that (in the context of opposing politics within Ethiopia) an "Oromo nation" is being forged out of the various major groupings: Arssi, Borana, Leqa, Macha, Wollo, Raya, Tulema, Guji, etc. (Tubiana 1977: 409-417, various **Horn of Africa** publications). There are considerable cultural diversities between pastoralists and sedentaries, and Oromiyya-speakers are variously Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and followers of traditional religions. But underlying these differences are two important shared linguistic and cultural attributes. Firstly, any Oromiyya-speaker, regardless in which dialect he or she converses, can be understood by any other Oromo (Gragg 1982: xiv). Completely fluent communication may require anywhere from a couple of weeks of regular contact (say, for Wallagga versus Harar) to a couple of months (say, for Wallagga versus Borana) (Gragg 1982: xiv). Secondly, all Oromo share core common cultural values and modes of thought and feel culturally comfortable with each other (see Levine 1974). It remains now to discuss the specific group of Oromo-speaking peoples with whom this thesis is concerned.

### The Orma of the Tana River District

The Orma are an anomaly in the ethnography of Kenya's people because, with the exception of some very early traveller accounts, little has been written about them. This is odd for two reasons. The first is that, even though they inhabit arid lands, they are fairly accessible. Indeed, contemporary traveller accounts frequently mention the "nomads with the sky-blue cloaks offering milk" on the highway to Garsen (Trillo1987: 261). Secondly, they are an interesting group for study as they have been cut off from their Boran kinsmen and, hence, from both their homelands and all other Oromos, for over seventy-five years. Throughout these years many differences from the Oromo norm have evolved in their cultural styles (Baxter 1988: personal communication).

The Orma are predominantly riverine pastoralists dependent largely on cattle, with lesser numbers of small stock (sheep and goats) and a few camels. By the standards of other East African pastoralists their homeland is comparatively rich. This is the result not only of higher than normal average annual rainfall, but also of certain factors which contribute to the effectiveness of the rainfall to promote vegetative growth. These factors include a bimodal annual rainfall pattern, limited slope of land over the whole district resulting in most of the precipitation soaking into the land rather than running off, and the presence of the large Tana River delta and the flood plains of numerous rivers which cross-cut the district east to west. It should be noted that as one travels inland these rivers become seasonal and are usually dry for most of the year forcing the Orma to water their herds directly at the Tana or at various wells interspersed throughout Ormland.

According to the 1979 Kenyan census, the Orma number just over 30,000. Their territory is roughly coterminous with the Tana River District if one excludes the flood plains of the Tana, which are inhabited primarily by the agricultural Pokomo. The neighbors of the Orma to the west are the Kitui, a subgroup of the Kamba people, on the east by the Pokomo, on the north by the Somali, and on the south by the Giriama. In the

southern reaches of their territory the Orma live in areas near Kenya's coast and, as a result, many of the inhabitants of these areas are bilingual in Swahili and Orma.

Among themselves, the Orma recognize three major divisions which can be analytically distinguished in terms of their ecologies, river systems, and minor cultural variations:

(1.) The Chaffa, the southernmost Orma group inhabit the lush Tana River delta and the hinterlands to the north and west. This category of Orma is distinguished from the rest by its heavy specialization in cattle, a high degree of sedentarization (with a correspondingly high population density), a greater degree of market involvement, and greater dependence upon agriculture.

(2.) The Galole Orma live along the seasonal Galole River that flows east to west and joins the Tana at Hola (the district headquarters). Roughly 40% of the Galole are settled and strongly integrated into the market economy; the remaining 60% appear to be less involved in the market economy, to be to a greater extent nomadic, and correspondingly more self-sufficient in meeting their subsistence needs (see Ensminger 1984). It should be stressed that the Galole are all practicing pastoralists, however, regardless of their degree of sedentarization.

(3.) Those Orma in the north (known by a number of names that are usually terms for wells or rivers) utilize the seasonal Hiran River running west to east from Kitui to the Tana. This is the most arid area of Ormland, which is reflected in the fact that these northern Orma are almost entirely nomadic and maintain more of a diversified herd composition (including camels and a greater percentage of small stock) than their southern kinsmen. They share the territory with large numbers of Somali who cross from Garissa District in the north and east.

It is this last section of Orma upon whom this study is predominantly focused. Of all the Orma it is these people who suffer the most from the droughts and desertification and it is they who have sought sanctuary in the greater numbers in the market towns in the territory, of which Garissa is the largest.

## Chapter Two

### Fieldwork on the Tana

#### The Scope of the Research

It was during the 1950s and 1960s that East African pastoralism became a subject for serious anthropological research, if by that is meant detailed study through a prolonged period of close observation and participatory fieldwork. Studies of the Maasai, Turkana, Samburu, Borana, Somali and Karimojong were then undertaken by researchers such as Jacobs (1963, 1965), Gulliver (1955), Spencer (1965, 1973), Baxter (1954), Lewis (1961) and the Dyson-Hudsons (1966) (see Map 3 for the ethnic distribution of Kenya). These anthropologists produced works that yielded a considerable amount of interesting regional ethnography as well as having a substantial impact on the general theoretical study of nomadism and pastoralism.

This period when these researchers were mainly gathering data was one in which the pastoral peoples of East Africa appeared to lead lives almost totally unaffected by the changes that, in the colonial era, had completely transformed social conditions in the neighboring agricultural communities. The theoretical orientations of these anthropologists, namely British "structural-functionalism" and American "cultural ecology", tended to predispose this generation of investigators to look at systems of pastoralism as self-contained, self-regenerating and balanced systems.

The researcher who sets out today to observe the pastoralists of East Africa finds himself in a rather different situation from those working during the last decades of colonial rule. Pastoral systems can no longer be seen as being self-contained by our stretch of the imagination; but rather it is painfully obvious that they are in the process of engaging the multi-dimensional "Western" capitalist economy. It is impossible, even analytically, to wish away the changes that have taken and are still taking place in these societies. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the seeds of this transformation of pastoral life had

already been sown before the time when Spencer wrote the following concerning the Samburu:

I find it inconceivable that the people I describe in these pages can change substantially in the foreseeable future: while all evidence suggests that the changes taking place elsewhere in Kenya will continue to bypass them for many years to come and may even encourage them to take several more steps in the direction of a return to traditions... (1965:xxi)

Anthropological treatises on change in African societies have concentrated on one major theme - the conservatism displayed by pastoralists in the face of the technical innovations deliberately introduced by government and international aid agencies. Early attempts to explain this perceived opposition to change tended to relate it to cultural values, notably the so-called East African "Cattle Complex" (see Herskovitz 1926), and later ones contrast the "ecological irrationality" of many of these national and international aid projects with the rationality of pastoral subsistence production (see, for example, Rigby 1969, Jacobs 1975, Spencer 1973, Dahl & Hjort 1976). Up to now anthropology has not paid much attention to the more subtle transformation of the material base of pastoral society which lies in its integration into the framework of a centralized state or to the long-term significance of even a limited involvement in paid jobs, marketing of produce or the creation of "reserve activities". Even though these changes might affect only a minority of the population directly, they could signify an important transformation of the foundations of the pastoral economic system, the implications of which will not clearly be seen until the society concerned is faced with a crisis.

Within the Kenyan context surprisingly little has been written on the implications for pastoral nomads of labour migration on the one hand and of urbanization in all its various forms on the other. One reason is that the migrants from pastoral communities tend to be a minority in those large cities which have attracted most attention from researchers interested in rural-urban migration (see Parkin 1974). Their number, even when large in absolute

terms, is always insignificant in comparison with the masses of migrants arriving from the more numerous agricultural groups, such as the Kikuyu, Luo or Kamba. Undoubtedly, there are no cities or towns outside northern Kenya where the population of Cushitic-speaking people - Rendille, Oromo and Somali - exceeds 1% of the total urban population.

In the arid North, urbanization on a much smaller scale is taking place in the small market towns and administrative centers from that encountered in Nairobi or Mombasa. Many of these sites deserve the name "town" simply because of the way they stand out physically from their surroundings and because of their commercial and administrative concerns rather than their size - perhaps 30 to 100 permanent and semi-permanent buildings which in other locations would barely even warrant the name of "village". Their inhabitants refer to them as "towns" and, hence, I use the designation. In these centers pastoralists and ex-pastoralists comprise the dominant part of the population, unlike the situation in large cities but, unfortunately, these small towns have not yet been the focus of a significant amount of scholarly attention. Pastoral studies in general, and those relating to East Africa in particular, have tended to draw the analytical boundary of the pastoral society just outside the town gate, discussing these small administrative centers or market towns, when they are mentioned at all, as if they were not part of the pastoral society but an intrusion into it.

In this literature, traders and civil servants tend to be seen as a category distinct from pastoralists (Frantz 1978: 103). Townsmen are regarded as partially "detrribalized" (Spencer 1973: 170) and women and young men are described as being lured into town by the prospect of low levels of social control and the spread of western consumer ideology rather than as pushed into town by the non-viability of pastoralism or as acting in economic niches supplementary to pastoralism (Frantz 1975: 347, 1978: 104). Few writers on east African pastoralism have made use of the notion that semi-sedentarization in towns on the part of wealthy pastoralists is not a renunciation of pastoral life but, rather, a way of

grafting the traditional economy onto the national economy, akin to a North American who lives on a farm and "commutes" to a job in town (Baxter 1972: 210).

### Fieldwork and Methodology

I arrived in Garissa town to begin my first fieldwork experience on a hot and dry afternoon at the height of one of the most severe dry seasons for many years (see Map 5 & 6 for an overview of the Tana River District and Garissa town). This is Kenya's hottest town and often unflaggingly humid as well. During the day the thermometer rarely leaves the 32 - 37 degree Celsius zone. This was also my first venture into the arid regions of the North although I had visited Kenya previously in 1984.

I chose to conduct fieldwork among the Orma for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I was well acquainted with the literature on the Oromo of Ethiopia and was particularly impressed by their ability to adapt to any situation which presented itself. They appear in all the environmental and economic niches of Ethiopia in a capacity as farmers, nomads, traders, Praetorian guards, even, for a short time, Emperors of the Ethiopian Empire. Their language and culture is constantly under extreme pressure from their Amhara and Somali neighbors, yet they persist and stubbornly cling to values that appeared to be best explained, for lack of an appropriate term, as an "Oromo-ness". I was interested in gaining a firsthand insight of what this pan-Oromo identity was all about. Secondly, the Orma appeared to be an interesting group since they were effectively cut off from the main body of Oromo. I wanted to see how this isolation might have affected traditional and contemporary Oromo values. Finally, and as previously mentioned, the Orma were relatively "unknown" in the literature and by conducting fieldwork in Ormland I felt that a contribution could be made to the fields of anthropology and African ethnography.

I had finished clearing all research formalities in Nairobi and in the provincial headquarters of Coast Province, and was now down to the district level in the administrative hierarchy. My major concern upon arrival in Garissa that day was not so

much whether I would find the District Commissioner or the District Officers, but how I would be able to obtain a place to live. In Nairobi I had been warned that housing was a serious problem in Garissa. Furthermore, I realized that the choice I made, if I had one at all, might influence my chances of getting in touch with the various sectors of the town population. This was solved by the District Officer who took me to a *hoteli* and "suggested" that the owner "give me the very best room". The accomodation, complete with electric fan, proved to be quite satisfactory. And so it was that I took up residence in a back room of one of Garissa's busiest bars in the very shadow of the mosque across the street.

Living near the center of town, I had a fairly good view of all the comings and goings of people. Since the *hoteli* included a bar, the lodging eventually proved most useful for making contacts and compiling information. Venturing out at night was discouraged by the local police and military authorities and I tended to miss most of the nocturnal events.

The population of Garissa is approximately 2500 (Obudho 1983: 372), depending on the season and how large an area one includes. The size and complexity of Garissa made it useful for the "hanging around" approach of participant observation, particularly for frequenting the marketplace, government offices, relief and foreign aid camps, as well as the development projects. This approach was supplemented with an informal household survey. Most Oromo are tied together through contact networks and I achieved a pretty fair coverage of the population of the town by systematically expanding my contacts, for example through meeting friends of friends. Apart from some basic data on cash and subsistence incomes, on the ethnic distribution in the various town segments and the like, the town survey proved useful for calling attention to the absence of certain types of contacts. Examples that were well documented through the survey are the almost total lack of personal contacts with the Somali and the presence in town of various "low-caste" groups both within the Orma and Somali community, members of which would not be easily distinguished from other Orma or Somali but who largely kept to themselves. As

mentioned, the survey was rather informal and was for my own benefit to make the fieldwork a little easier especially given the time constraint that I had. This demonstration, apart from the great benefit to me in establishing face-to-face relations, also assisted me in my need to avoid carrying out various amounts of largely independent field studies. I was able to ascertain quite quickly the areas of town in which I was largely interested for the purposes of the thesis.

Since I occasionally refer to my survey data in this study, a more formal presentation of the survey is required. After a month of living in Garissa, I felt sure of achieving some useful results. My basic intention was to carry out systematic samples in a few key areas, such as household economy, migration patterns and interaction. A first move towards carrying out the survey was to settle for a proper method of making random samples. As is often the case in demarcated areas, the proper sampling of households proved difficult. After considering possible methods, I decided the best would be to make a map of the entire area with houses and quarters indicated and numbered. A great deal of time and effort was expended in this task. Needless to say, my mapping aroused people's curiosity and, when they realized the degree of work involved, sympathy.

Many of the Oromos are illiterate and few have attended government or mission schools so Swahili and, to a lesser extent, English, are seldom used. For these reasons, a formal questionnaire was deemed inappropriate for information gathering in this case. I decided to interview, on an informal basis, those who could speak English and who could translate for me to those who could not, committing the interviews to paper later in the day.

It is important to note here that the majority of the data collected consisted of oral information and, of course, it is very difficult to verify such testimony. Oral traditions differ in a number of important respects from conventional history based on written documents. Unlike a document which is usually contemporaneous with the events it describes and survives unchanged into the present, oral traditions are only preserved by being remembered and retold by successive generations from the time of the event to the

present. They are thus subject to the lapses in memory and manipulation by successive tellers in the process of transmission (see Vansina 1965: 4-6). Much of what I say in this thesis is based on what I was told, subject to the sort of cross-checking and verification that was possible in Garissa. While my informants might have been incorrect or selective about what they offered, such interval and extensive checks as I was able to make in the field led me to conclude that the level of reliability was remarkably high. I was simply not in the field long enough to say more than this, but I had a good relationship with my informants and I see no reason for any major deception on their part. I felt I was honest in my work and was repaid in kind. Nonetheless, the data should be read and assessed with these caveats in mind.

In part because of language difficulties, it would have been impossible to work in Garissa without the help of assistants. During the period when the data collection was carried out I employed two assistants, one, an Orma named Jaldessa, the other a Swahili called Mohammed, to carry out much of the actual interviewing although I was always present and answers were directed at me. It proved fruitful to have members of different ethnic groups working as assistants and interacting among themselves. We had many chats together about cultural differences, which was revealing not only for myself, but also, I believe, for those two individuals. These regular discussions usually posed essential questions that provoked the need for further investigation. The daily review of interview material regularly raised new questions that needed to be followed up, and so for a long period the number of issues that called out for further exploration kept increasing. This meant a slowing down of the survey, and perhaps a certain diffuseness in the focus; but in return this method enabled me to move continuously among the different groups in town, visiting informants with whom I spent half a day or an evening with an assistant.

The language problem naturally created limitations for a study of the Orma in town and pasture. I often had to rely on my assistants in a capacity as interpreters particularly in interactions with older people who spoke little, if any, English or Swahili. In a way these

difficulties are reflected in the focus of the present study. It certainly does not deal with the more subtle aspects of life in a multiethnic town, aspects which require a detailed knowledge of the local languages. On the other hand my intention has been to concentrate on the selected aspects, since I considered them vital for my understanding of the processes of change in the region before I embarked on more extensive fieldwork. For this sort of preliminary study language difficulties did not seem to be a serious problem.

I subsequently became involved in various development projects in the region. Such jobs as assisting in the construction of a new school building, digging a water hole, and helping in the distribution of relief supplies offered ample opportunities for participant observation and discussion. I had a standard set of questions from which I worked whenever I found myself in these situations. Basically, I asked questions concerning the lifestyles of the nomads and former-nomads. Elders offered versions on "the way things used to be", while younger men were instructive on the occupational possibilities now open to them. Language posed a problem as I did not speak Oromo and could offer only a basic semblance of Swahili. However, I always worked with specific individuals who both translated and instructed me in Swahili and some Oromo. This approach worked rather well to make acquaintances and most of the people I met in this way were extremely patient and considerate. Towards the end of the working day I discussed the day's conversations with my assistants; we went through any difficulties and uncertainties that had arisen, the accuracy of the survey, and so on. Whenever needed, and if possible, I tried to improve the reliability of the survey by rechecking unclear issues and cross-checking controversial points with several informants. The generally positive reception I received was probably due to the fact that the interviews were non-intimidating and were carried out after three weeks in the field, by which time I already knew quite a few people in the area, and even more knew me.

The market place was, perhaps, the most useful spot for gathering information about current issues and contacts, and I spent a great deal of time there, chatting with market

traders and craftsmen. Here one could hear both town gossip and rumors from the rural areas. I would normally find groups of elders in, or just outside the market place, conferring throughout the day. If I wanted to get in touch with people, a good method was also to move along the verandahs outside the *dukas*, so as to exchange a word or so with work group members, shop keepers or itinerant hawkers and traders. At one end of a row of *dukas* was the mosque, where less informal meetings, particularly of Somali, Swahili and Orma elders, were held. Another spot in town where people would meet, and where it proved useful to linger, was at the offices of the local government administration, particularly since most local problems were brought here, such as cattle raids, consequences of drought or deluge, theft of *shamba* products, and some other sundry complaints. Apart from these more "public" areas one could also move around the *manyattas*, or stop at a *duka* or at a small *shamba* where people would be working. After a while, I seldom failed to meet somebody who would have time to offer me a cup of tea. All the visits to rural areas outside of Garissa were made either to the rural households of acquaintances from Garissa town or to their relatives.

As time went by and I developed some familiarity with the local scene and local issues to talk about with specific individuals, I tended increasingly to meet people in their homes. The greatest surprise during fieldwork was the open cooperativeness of informants and the considerable hospitality and generosity of their families. Orma have a "host" system whereby travellers are customarily taken into a family and given food and lodging. This relationship between host and guest lasts a lifetime and is, ideally, passed on to succeeding generations. After receiving an invitation I would often go there together with an assistant having bought good quality *miraa* and cigarettes in the morning at the market. In a few cases these meetings were quite intense and continued on a daily basis for over a week. Like many other anthropologists, I also made a number of friends who acted, in differing amounts, as informants. The size of the town actually proved less problematic for gathering the required information, although the fact that I never managed to meet all the

people I wanted before the fieldwork period was over, since this kind of interaction is a social activity which requires a lot of time, was a disappointment.

Some of the other surveys which I occasionally refer also need elaboration. While in the field I was not restricted to Garissa and its immediate area. Indeed, I was fortunate in being able to travel through a large section of the Tana River District. I lived with an Orma family for two weeks in their cattle camp approximately 30 km. to the south-east of Garissa. A significant amount of discussion was undertaken in the pastures with this nomadic household. The data collection was to interview the household head and various male members of his extended family. This task proved to be quite difficult in the rangelands owing to the rigors of cattle-keeping and other forms of animal husbandry. These were occupations in which I was unskilled and, hence, really unable to provide any support or help and, as a result, I mainly remained near the homestead. In addition, I ventured down the Tana River towards the Kenyan coast and spent a few days in each of Bura, Hola and Garsen. At Bura I was able to observe first-hand the large irrigation projects on the Galole River and discussed the expectations, workings and results of the program with project managers and a few of the "recipients". The businessmen in Garissa, Hola, Bura and Garsen were also informally interviewed.

I was also quite fortunate to be able to spend a few days on the island of Lamu. While enjoying a pleasant change of scenery I conducted a fairly extensive survey of the materials in the Lamu Museum collection. It was here that Sheikh Ahmad Badaway offered his instruction and insight on both past and contemporary issues regarding the coastal areas and Tana River District.

Much of the data collected through these various surveys are not presented in this study. The major significance of both mapping and surveying was, as I've said, partly as a check and a reassurance and partly to enable me to form a picture in my mind of the larger Tana Valley social system. As such, I made contact with many of my informants through these survey efforts outside of Garissa proper.

In order to convey an impression of my life in the field I would like to finish this section by briefly sketching three of the roles which I think were of particular significance for my involvement in the social life of the Orma:

(1.) "White Man". I was assumed to be wealthy by local standards and, as a result, a potential resource. Many at first assumed that I was a member of the "development set" working on one of the projects along the Tana. In other cases I was initially thought to be a Christian missionary, and sometimes to be British or American. These hypotheses soon fell by the way side as people began to get to know me and since I did not interact with the other Europeans in town.

(2.) Employer. People expected me to be authoritarian, an expectation that I never managed to fulfil. I paid salaries that were as high as the local community would tolerate and only demanded regular work hours. Once I began to talk about these matters, claiming that what people saw were expressions of my culture, different from that of the British, for example, and that I could see no point in denying my own culture, my position was, for better or worse, accepted.

(3.) Anthropologist. Because my being a newcomer in town was normal rather than exceptional, and because I spent time discussing my aims and interests with the people I met, I was also accepted in my role as a social scientist.

To conclude this section, I finally ceased to think of Mohammed and Jaldessa as informants or assistants and began to consider them people with whom I shared experiences. This sense is implied by an Oromo word, *obbolaa*, meaning "related person". I am not sure exactly when we became *obbolaa*, but it was surely a watershed in my research.

### Chapter Three

#### Knowledge of the Orma

There appears to be no known recognizable reference to the Oromo, the larger ethnolinguistic cluster to which the Orma belong, before the middle of the 16th century, but accounts are relatively numerous from then on. At least from the time of their appearance on the Ethiopian scene, the Oromo have been known to the Amhara and, hence, to the world outside Ethiopia as "Galla". This is not an Oromo word, and no Oromo group uses it as a term for self-identification (Gragg 1982: xiii). "Galla" is a nickname in Amharic probably meaning "emigrants". Oromo from different regions differ in the degree to which they find the term offensive. Their own name is "Oroma" (or Oromo) from *Ilm Orma*, or "sons of Orma", after their eponymous ancestor (Trimingham 1965:187).<sup>1</sup> Other explanations have been offered as well. Reinisch in his *Somali Worterbuch* (1902) suggested that "Galla" was likely a derivative of the Somali root *gal*, "stranger", particularly "non-Muslim" (Baxter 1986: personal communication). His theory falls short, however, as most of the Oromos in the area in which he was living were Muslim. Arabic speakers are adept at producing derivations with an appropriate story attached. One such holds that when Wolab, the ancestor of the Ilm Orma, was summoned by the Prophet's envoy to embrace Islam, the Oromo chief's refusal was reported to the Prophet in the words *gal la* (he said "No"). The Prophet, upon hearing this said, "let this then be the denomination of the infidels in the future" (Trimingham 1965: 187).

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<sup>1</sup> The Boran neither recognize the term "Galla" nor "Oromo" as valid concepts for themselves. They view "Oromo" as a category opposed to themselves, associated mainly with the Tana River Orma. Popular etymology among Boran derives "Oromo" from an expression which is used for a person who is in opposition, a traitor, or somebody who cannot be trusted in the best interests of the community (Dahl 1979: 26). It is interesting that they regard their Tana River kinsmen in such a manner.

### Literature Review

Most of the early commentators on the Oromo, whether they were travellers, missionaries, diplomats or undercover agents, appear to have been keen enthusiasts of Oromo culture and invariably convey affection and admiration for the people. This is not to say that they did not, at times, view the Oromo a little ethnocentrically: de Salviac, for example, wondered if "les Gallas" mightn't have shared a common descent with "les Gaules" (de Salviac 1901, in Huntingford 1955); and the missionary explorer Ludwig Krapf saw the Oromos as "the Germans of Africa", that is, as an industrious nation destined to take a lead in the continent (Levine 1974: 135)!

The Oromo were comparatively lucky, maybe deservedly, in those who wrote on them and their language in the nineteenth century and the first half of this one. The roster is a distinguished one: d'Abbadie, Azais and Chambard, Cechi, Cerulli, de Salviac, Foot, Hudson and Walker, Krapf, Paulitischke, Pecci, Plowden, and in Kenya, Alice Werner and the Websters. In sum, a solid descriptive base was laid for language studies and also the beginnings of an indigenous history and oral literature, not to mention a start towards an understanding of the *gada* system, which has become the institutional hallmark of Oromo culture.

There was, in particular, a great outpouring of Oromo studies after the Second World War. Indeed, there has been so much activity that it is almost impossible to give an orderly systematic account. There are those such as Andrzejewski, Herbert Lewis and Paul Baxter who come back and forth to their Oromo data through the years, as their obligations and preoccupations have allowed. Others, such as Haberland, have always set their specifically Oromo-based work in a wider and more comparative perspective. Simply to divide Oromo studies into time bands or strata would be to impose a false order. Equally, to group the studies vertically, as it were, by subject headings such as "history", "ethnography", "language", etc., would also make for arbitrary divisions. Boundaries between academic

disciplines are as hazy and indeterminate as ethnic boundaries and, indeed, are often as bitterly contested.

The work of Haberland is a useful point from which to trace post-war developments in Oromo studies. His work spans history, ethnology, ethnography, language and material culture. He carried out extensive fieldwork in the early 1950s and published his encyclopedic **Galla Sud-Athiopians** in 1963. At the same time P.T.W. Baxter was conducting field research among the Boran of northern Kenya (Baxter 1954: unpublished Ph.D. thesis). Both worked independently of the other and each had different training and subject interests; Haberland's were more ethnological in the German tradition while Baxter's were more sociological in the British tradition. However, their ethnographic data on the Boran agree in almost every detail as, for example, on kinship terminology, the organization of the age and generation *gada* system, details of ritual practices and the like (Baxter 1986: personal communication). Such agreement is encouraging, for it shows firstly that, however they may be inclined to view the data, from differing perspectives, there does appear to be a body of "ethnographic fact" which can be agreed upon, whatever each individual may make of it. Secondly, and more importantly, each provides data which the other does not. This demonstrated the need for complementary studies of the same culture by different researchers with different working perspectives. Quite simply, the study of a culture is never "done" nor "finished" nor "completed". This point, though obvious to many in the social sciences, does not seem apparent to many of the bureaucrats and entrepreneurial academics who grant research funds and control research permits.

The works of Asmarom Legesse (1973) and John Hinnant (1978), on the Ethiopian Boran and Guji respectively, demonstrates this anthropological truth. Legesse's data agree substantially with those of Haberland and Baxter. However, Legesse pushes his inquiry farther and in new directions, as in his analysis of Boran notions about the structure of time and events. As is indicated by the subtitle to his book **Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society**, he also situates Oromo studies within the context of

comparative African studies. The strength of all recent Oromo ethnographies is that they are set in such comparative anthropological and/or Africanist contexts, which, of course, is essential if they are not to degenerate into curiosities of interest only to folklorists. The work of Hinnant and Legesse also ties in with and extends Knuttson's (1963) work on the *kallu* institution among the Macha, and of Herbert Lewis' (1965) on the Kingdom of Jimma Abba Jifar, and later work among the Oromo of Ambo district in the Shoa Province of Ethiopia.

This cumulative ethnographic endeavour was the mark of a number of scholars in the 1960s and early 1970s which were years of great productivity for Western (and particularly American) social scientists in Ethiopian studies. Hector Blackhurst submitted his thesis on Tulema settlers who live in Arssi areas of Bale Province to Manchester in 1974. His work is also a notable contribution to the comparative study of ethnicity and immigration (Blackhurst 1980, 1978). John Hinnant, who was in the field from 1966-71, presented a thesis at Chicago and published several articles on the Guji, with valuable data on *gada*, ritual and symbolism and contributions to the comparative study of these topics (see Baxter & Almagor 1978: 207-245). At around the same time William Torry, after preliminary studies among the Boran of Ethiopia, worked among the Boran-speaking Gabbra camel herders of northern Kenya (Torry 1978: 183-207). He presented his thesis in 1973 to Columbia and has published several articles.

All of this research in Ethiopia antedated the 1974 Revolution and only a few of this group of authors have had the chance to return to the field since that date, and then only briefly. This body of pre-Revolutionary field research still provides a substantial proportion of the data for Oromo ethnographic studies. It is a rich mine of data, but has hardly had anything added to it since the Revolution.

All the research listed above contributes generally to African studies and social anthropology. This point should be stressed because a good deal of Ethiopian studies have tended to be inward-looking. Oromo studies will develop further as long as they continue

as part of African studies on the one hand and pursue particular theoretical issues in specific disciplines on the other. If not, they risk becoming stylized and dreary chronicles.

Although they have practically ceased in Ethiopia, anthropological studies of Oromo have continued in Kenya despite the droughts and the famines. All the studies I have cited so far have been in the "Other Cultures" tradition; that is, they seek to interpret specific aspects of particular Oromo cultures to non-Oromo. Recent Oromo studies in Kenya have had a different bias in that they have been as much, or more, concerned with the problems that peoples who just happen to be Oromo have in coping with the modern world, rather than with the interpretation of Oromo culture as such. They are none the worse for that and the Boran, in particular, have been well served. Gudrun Dahl's **Suffering Grass** (1979), a study of the Boran of the Uaso Nyiro River area of Kenya was the first to attempt to study an Oromo people in the context of the changes consequent upon colonial rule, incorporation into the (independent) state of Kenya and into the world market system. On the Uaso Nyiro, the already disruptive consequences of these events were aggravated by the drought of the early 1970s, which the Boran had to face at a time when they had already been devastated by the undeclared war between Kenya and Somalia of the late 1960s. Boran studies since that time have mainly been studies of survival under drought conditions. Dahl's analysis develops clearly from her detailed studies of the material bases of daily life, and the problems with which the Boran have had to wrestle in order to survive at all. Her work, like much of that which has followed among other Kenya pastoralists, is concerned directly with the "economic development" of pastoral peoples. In other words, trying to help ease the nomads into pursuing the different forms of economic adaptations that they have had forced upon them, so they would not have to rely on international aid relief. The study which she published jointly with Stephen Sandford entitled, **Which Way To Go: A study of people and pastoralism in Isiolo District of Kenya** (1978) is one of the better studies of the problems of pastoral development. Anders Hjort's companion study, **Savanna Town** (1979), a study of Isiolo township, is not a study of

Oromo as such, but it was the first study of Oromo in town, and of Oromo coping with the destruction which incorporation into larger economic systems has inflicted on so many.

Richard Hogg has also worked among the Boran of Isiolo. His Ph.D. thesis, presented to Manchester University in 1981, is entitled **The Social and Economic Organization of the Boran of Isiolo District, Kenya**. His work is largely centered on the harsh details of daily life as endured by destitute, stockless or nearly stockless Boran. He compared the modes of life of those Boran who can, at least in part, survive by pastoralism with some supplementation from wage labour, with those who have been reduced to just surviving in "Food for Work" camps or similar settlements. Hogg has since carried out a second period of field research in which he was concerned with the analysis of the developmental possibilities for destitute pastoralists of irrigation agriculture as contrasted with government programmes to help them get started once again in pastoralism. In conjunction with this work, he has carried out comparative studies among the Turkana (Hogg 1985). Hogg's researches, which are based on solid ethnography and a familiarity with Boran language and culture, are directed by the anthropology of development as to the more traditional ethnography of cultural translation.

If drought, famine, misdirected development, misguided settlement policies, state politics, foreign interventions and wars continue to afflict the Horn (and there are few signs that they will cease to do so) then more and more Oromos are bound to suffer, and so Oromo studies are likely to continue to be studies in cultural and economic survival over the foreseeable future. Social anthropological studies of Oromos, as of other peoples, have become increasingly concerned with the practicalities of daily life and local responses to the pressures from environmental, economic, and political interventions which all Africans, and especially those of the Horn, have had to endure and continue to endure. Forced changes, destitution and the destruction or removal of their traditional means of production and subsistence - livestock and land, their grazing rights and their water - must alter their life-ways radically. It may thus well be that the self-sufficient and proud Oromo societies

which were encountered by the early ethnographers will soon be a thing of the past. At the moment there can only be few Oromos, whether in Kenya or Ethiopia, who are not worse fed than they were as recently as twenty-five years ago. So there seems good reason why development-oriented studies should become central to Oromo studies: the anthropology of the Oromo is unlikely to become merely "salvage ethnography" collecting cultural debris.

The only fieldwork study to deal specifically with the Tana River Orma subgroup of the Oromo (and with which this thesis is concerned) is that of Jean Ensminger. Her Ph.D. thesis entitled **Political Economy Among the Pastoral Galole Orma** (1984) is concerned with the consequences of the transition from a subsistence pastoral economy to an economy geared to commercial production. She avoids comment on whether or not the transition has been a "good thing" for the Orma; but she does document many of the changes which have occurred, notably dietary changes, changes in work routines (which have been particularly disadvantageous to most women), the proletarianization of the pastoralists, degradation of the environment around the new townships and, most conspicuously, increases in the "inequality in the distribution of wealth" (Baxter 1986: personal communication, Ensminger 1984: chapter 4). She also demonstrates, as others have elsewhere, the cruel way in which "the subsistence sector is subsidising commercial production" (Ensminger 1984: chapter 5 & 6; see also Townsend 1978). However, much more work needs to be done on the Orma as their appearance in the anthropological record is scanty and they are underrepresented compared to their importance on the Kenyan scene. Hence, it is with this particular Oromo group with which this thesis is predominantly concerned.

It remains now to look back and piece together the recent history of the Orma in order to formulate a greater understanding of their contemporary lifestyle. As I have stressed, there is a wealth of information on Oromo in general but very little on the Orma in particular. Still, a picture can be drawn by gathering together the bits and pieces that are available.

### Pre-colonial History

It is generally accepted by both Oromos and scholars, that the cradleland of Oromo culture is in southwestern Ethiopia in the highland area to the southeast of Lake Abaya. Both the oral traditions and historical documents indicate that this was the area from which the Oromo launched their massive expansion in the sixteenth century (see Bahrey, translated by Beckingham & Huntingford 1954: chapter 4). This immense population movement was one of those rare instances of rapid mass migration in the history of East Africa, comparable in scale to the dramatic expansion of the Zulu out of the Nguni peoples of southern Africa in the 19th century. In the space of three hundred years, the Oromo, through a series of migrations, moved as far north as Eritrea, eastward as far as the Juba River and southward to just beyond Mombasa along the coast. This expansion caused the Oromo to divide into many different groups but most of them remain adjacent to the central areas of Oromo and all, as previously noted, speak regional dialects of a single language (Gragg 1982: xiii).

Two main Oromo sub-groups inhabit northern Kenya today. The Boran, numbering approximately 105,000, are the larger and inhabit the regions surrounding Marsabit and Moyale, while the Orma, with a population of approximately 30,000, are much smaller and are confined to the lower reaches of the Tana River. The Orma were probably an offshoot of the Boran initially and there is some evidence to indicate that it was they who once occupied the hinterland regions on the south Kenyan coast to near Mombasa (Huntingford 1955: 201). Today the Orma are separated from the Boran by a number of other ethnic groups, such as the Samburu, Rendille, Gabbra and Somali. The separation of the Orma from the main body of Oromo is of relatively recent date, some fifty to seventy-five years ago (Badawy 1988: personal communication) and probably occurred as a result of the intrusion of the Somali, as opposed to the departure of the Orma from the main body of Boran.

The Orma of today are thus the remains of what was once probably a much more numerous people. Today all but a few thousand occupy the Tana River District of Coast Province. The Tana River valley itself is occupied by the Bantu-speaking Pokomo agriculturalists. Situated parallel to the east and west banks are the semi-arid pasturelands and it is the regions on the west bank of the Tana which the Orma use to graze their herds.

The Oromo impact on eastern Kenya was a dramatic one, although this has waned considerably in this century. Only three centuries separate the time when they first burst on the scene to dominate the regions between the Juba River, the Galana River, and the central highlands of Kenya in the late 16th century and their elimination as a vital force in the area by the late 19th century (see Map 8). Little evidence remains from this period and we are compelled to rely on recent studies of the Boran Oromo of northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia in order to attempt to reconstruct an earlier situation.

Our knowledge of the pre-Colonial economic, political, and status relations between the predominantly Bantu-speaking farmers of the Tana River on the one hand and the surrounding pastoralists on the other is scanty and impressionistic. Early European travellers were very free with ethnocentric nouns like "slaves", "serfs", "kings" and "chiefs" when describing the peoples they encountered in their wanderings through Africa. In true 19th century imperialistic style, they exalted the wealthier of the Pokomo, and particularly the Galla, along the Tana river, into "chiefs" and "sultans". Many of them recorded that the Pokomo were "subjects" of the Galla; phrases such as "absolute slavery", "periods of long subjugation", and "a state of vassalage" occur frequently in the writings of the 1880s and 1890s (Townsend 1973: 290).

Indeed, the 19th century literature on the Horn of Africa contains many references to various "helot" groups, "despised castes", "client peoples", etc., all living as subjects of the pastoralists, who are accorded the greatest prestige and privileges. Some of these "subject" peoples are farmers, others blacksmiths, craftsmen, and so on. Uniformly, the pastoralists hold them in contempt, yet would not attempt to do without them. There are

many explanations for this contempt, but one of the most compelling surely must be that sedentarization is an option only for someone who has failed at herding.

From the limited data available, I would suggest that the links between pastoralists and sedentaries in the Tana region may have been less asymmetrical than in some other contact situations. Rather than a relationship of dominance and subordination, Oromo and other various Bantu-speaking peoples (Kamba, Pokomo, Giriama and Swahili) appear to have exhibited what Townsend (1978) termed as "an association founded on a biased symbiosis". Association was essential for each side. To give an example, Pokomo provided the Orma with access to water, with refuge in times of famine and war, and with agricultural produce, pottery, medical services, tobacco and honey (Townsend 1980: 103). In return, the Orma provided the Pokomo with milk, meat, livestock, metal knives and fish-hooks, metal fishing-spear points, and jewellery (Townsend 1980:103).<sup>2</sup> The relationship was a mutually beneficial one, even if its overall balance somewhat favored the Orma.

At other areas of interface between the Orma and the settled peoples the symbiotic trading partnership seems to have followed similar lines. While information is scarce on the trading practices of the Orma it is possible to piece together a picture of the various economic, political and social relationships from the perspective of either the Swahili or the Mijikenda and that is what I do in the next section.

#### Early Trade and the Orma

We know that, in the 19th century, the Mijikenda and the Swahili to the south of the Tana were the outstanding market traders on the northeast African coast (see Fage 1978 &

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<sup>2</sup> It is ironic that the Orma supplied merchandise for a fishing economy when they themselves, as a result of the Cushitic fish taboo, did not consume fish. It appears that, in this instance, they were meeting and even creating a supply for a particular demand.

Ogot 1977, 1974). The Mijikenda produced or collected many of the trade items themselves including surplus grain, copra, and copal; while they obtained ivory, hippo teeth, and rhinoceros horn in gift exchanges from the Waata hunter-gatherers of the hinterland regions, and they set up mobile border markets where they acquired ivory and livestock products from the Orma (Spear 1981: 117). Mijikenda traders channeled these African goods to the coast where Swahili collected and repackaged the goods for shipment on departing Arab or Persian dhows.

The Lamu archipelago was historically the most important trading center in the area and remained so until the 1830's (Wilson 1979: 7). The bulk of Lamu's trade consisted of the exporting of mangroves cultivated on the islands and of agricultural produce grown by Swahili farmers on the mainland, but Lamu traders travelled up the Tana river to trade with Pokomo and Orma for ivory, hides and livestock (Spear 1981: 123).

Trade was conducted by local barter, at periodic four-day markets, at special border markets and by trading expeditions into neighboring areas. The exchange of foodstuffs and local products occurred in local and four-day markets where individuals marketed their own domestic food surpluses or craft products and exchanged them for imported goods such as iron, cloth, tobacco, an occasional gun and other items (see Baxter 1975: 214). Such markets were overseen by the elders while warriors maintained the market peace (Bohannon & Dalton 1962: 18). Regional trade was conducted at pre-arranged border market locations sited between adjacent peoples. The neutrality of such areas was established before trading began by oaths sworn by the two parties and, usually, by the sacrifice of a goat before trading was commenced (Badawy 1988: personal communication). Orma participated with varying intensity, but probably more as customers and transmitters than as principals, in the long distance trade with the coast and southern Ethiopia. This trade required them to deal with pastoral competitors whom they classified as enemies such as the Somali (Abir 1970: 132). Thus, trade would be conducted by people who were potentially hostile towards each other.

Lamu's fortunes began to decline, however, as Omani influence grew further south along the coast. The Omanis captured Lamu in the early 1830s and it no longer dominated the export trade as the Omani capitol of Zanzibar became the main export market. Nonetheless, Mijikenda trade remained and soon another coastal settlement, Takaungu ( a town south of present-day Malindi), became a flourishing center of Swahili-Mijikenda trade. Takaungu, like Lamu, conducted an extensive trade with the Oromos, whose partnership they secured through periodic payments of tribute. One sub-group of Mijikenda, the Giriama, maintained close relations with the Oromo and conducted an annual market at Likoni where they acted as brokers between the Orma and the Swahili traders of Takaungu. Relations with the Oromo were not always so friendly, however, and formal pacts had to be made to ensure peace for the duration of the trading season. The German explorer, J.L. Krapf vividly describes one such pact that he witnessed in 1845:

When the sultan of the Gallas (as he is called by the Swahilis) makes his appearance at Takaongo every second or third year, he is accompanied by several hundreds of his savage followers, and he must be received in state and pomp by the Governor of Takaongo, who meets him at the outskirts of the village under a salute of a large volume of firing from the Swahili musketry. When this has been accomplished, the Galla Majesty is placed on a new arm-chair and is carried by freeborn Swahilis in procession through the streets and at last desposited at an open and large place, where the Governor sits at his side and delivers the presents which consist of the chair (which the Sultan already occupies), of a slave, of a hundred clothes, or a quantity of tobacco (which the Galla love more than silver and gold, and for which they will readily deliver up their cattle, their copal and their ivory) and some other petty articles. After the Sultan has received these presents, he returns them by giving the Governor a number of cattle and elephants' teeth. After these transactions a cow is slaughtered by the Muhammedans, and a few bloody parts of the heart are eaten by the Swahilis and the Galla, who both swear in this manner and renew friendship and fidelity to each other. When all these ceremonies have been duely performed, the Galla soldiery is regalled with tobacco, rice and other eatables. His sable Majesty remains some ten to twenty days at Takaongo and its vicinity, during which time the Gallas sell their goods

and buy their commodities from the Swahilis. (Krapf 1860: 53)

It is not known for sure whether Krapf was referring here to the Orma specifically. It is likely that he was, however, as there is no record at all of the Boran frequenting the coast. The Orma, as we have seen, had occupied the coastal hinterlands at least fifty years before Krapf penned his description. The passage is interesting for it clearly displays the romantic notions attached to pastoral nomads by the European travellers of the 19th century. More important for our purposes here it makes it clear that the Oromo were engaged in a symbiotic trading relationship with the Swahili and Mijikenda. The passage, however, is the last significant reference to the Oromo in Kenya until the early 1900s. For reasons that are obscure the Orma disappeared as a dynamic influence in the region south of the Tana. In the 19th century they were in decline and apparently unable to resist the encroaching Somali. The "love feast" held somewhere in Jubaland between 1860 and 1865 by the Somali in which a substantial number of Orma chiefs were invited as guests and then massacred, was followed by the disappearance of the Orma as a power on the local political scene (Justus Strandes: **The Portuguese Period in East Africa** - translation of 1899 German original, Nairobi 1961). Indeed, by the 1880s, both the Orma and Boran were on the defensive. Large-scale Somali migrations from the East, Maasai expansion from the West, and widespread disease (smallpox and rinderpest<sup>3</sup>) and famine forced the Orma to withdraw north of the Galana River to the western regions of the Tana, while the Boran were reduced to a significantly decreased area in northern Kenya.

Baxter (1975) notes that this period of time was especially harsh for the Oromo. Indeed, it had permeated their consciousnesses so thoroughly that even men who had been born long after it spoke of it with such awe as if they had experienced it. Its name *tiite c'inaaca gur'aacca*, "the time when the rib cases were black with flies", suggests the desolation it caused (Baxter 1975: 221). It was a time when death stalked the land and the

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<sup>3</sup> Rinderpest is a highly infectious disease of cattle and sheep and goats caused by a virus that produces inflammation of the mucous membranes and intestines.

whole social and natural order were both brought to chaos and men became like beasts of the bush subsisting on roots and types of game which were polluting (Baxter 1975: 221). It is apparent that their neighbors did not suffer as badly. The inability of the Orma to retain their domination of the south is highlighted by the contrasting experience of such Oromo subgroups as the Macha in Ethiopia, where they were able to adopt settled agriculture (see Levine 1974, Hinnant 1978, Blackhurst 1978) and, eventually, became the prevailing sedentary political authorities (see Levine 1974, Knuttson 1963, Huntingford 1955).

#### British Colonization and the Orma

As can be seen from the above description, livestock did not play any significant part in the pre-colonial long distance trade between the interior of arid northeast Africa and the coast. On the Somali coast, livestock exports were nearly nonexistent at the end of the 19th century except to the north of the Protectorate, where the British occupation of Aden created an outlet for sheep and goats (Swift 1979: 448-449). It appears that this trade did not affect the Benadir (or the present-day Somali/Kenya) coast, which was in more direct contact with the Oromo.

British colonization of northern Kenya was clearly not motivated by an interest in livestock. Access to the ivory trade routes of southern Ethiopia may have been an attraction, but it appears to have been mainly for strategic purposes that Britain wished to include northern Kenya in her empire: it provided a way of countering the expansion of Abyssinian rule under Menelik II of Shoa. By 1900 however, the unanticipated arrival of British settlers in Kenya created a sudden demand for breeding stock which was felt both in Ethiopia and northern Kenya, and for a couple of decades the trade of Somali and Arab middlemen flourished between Moyale and Wajir in the north and Nyeri and Nanyuki to the south (Hjort 1979: 26). Bulls from northern Kenya were also traded to Maasai pastoralists who were eager to improve the breed of their herds they were striving to rebuild after the

great epizootic losses in the 1880s and 1890s. There was also a good market for small stock in the agricultural areas of central Kenya. Economic conditions were thus very favorable to the indigenous livestock traders who were dominated by the Somali. As time went on, some white settlers also acquired a foothold in livestock production, their initial stock having come partly from specialized Somali traders, and partly from animals confiscated in small-scale raids against the Nandi, the pastoral Somali, and other cattle-keeping peoples (Smith 1976: 116). As they themselves created large herds, they began to fear both competition from African producers and the spread of contagious diseases such as rinderpest or CBPP (Contagious Bovine Pleuro Pneumonia<sup>4</sup>) from areas where traditional subsistence pastoralism was practiced (Zwanenberg & King 1975: 97).

In the 1920s these settlers' influence became strong enough to create legal obstacles to the African livestock trade. The movements of traders, especially alien traders such as the Isaaq and Herti Somali, were restricted by new "pass rules" included in the ordinances of "Outlying Districts" (1926) and "Special Districts" (1934) which were used to encapsulate northern Kenya during the whole of the colonial period (Dahl 1979: 192). Holders of visas to Kenya needed additional licenses to visit the Northern Frontier District and NFD. Somali were not allowed to enter other districts without special permission. Quarantine regulations made cattle exports from Isiolo and southwards illegal from 1922 until well into the 1940's. The sheep and goat trade was allowed to continue, but even that was hampered by quarantine rules. On average 40-80,000 sheep and goats were legally exported from the NFD each year in addition to massive illegal exports to Kikuyu areas (Dalleo 1975). This trade depended on the degree of coincidence between good harvests in Central Province and drought conditions in the NFD (Dalleo 1975: 158). Not only the settlers but also the

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<sup>4</sup> Contagious Bovine Pleuro Pneumonia is an acute febrile and often fatal respiratory disorder of cattle and related animals. Essentially, it is an inflammation of the pleura (delicate membrane that lines each half of the thorax of mammals) and lungs.

representatives of the colonial administration saw it as being in their interest to limit the small stock trade, since it was feared that the reserve of meat animals available in the North would be depleted, making it difficult for the army to obtain provisions of beef (Dalleo 1975: 158). This encapsulation of animals in the North notwithstanding however, the sheep and goat trade continued throughout the colonial period.

#### The Market Towns (1899 - 1960)

As a result of the lack of appreciation of the resources of northern Kenya during the first twenty-five years of British rule, there was little investment in district administration and it was frequently reorganized (Badawy 1988: personal communication). For the Tana area this meant periods of military administration alternating with civilian rule and, at certain periods, practically no administration at all. The status of the area varied between being a sub-district, a district in its own right within the NFD, to being part of the Garissa-Tana merged district (Gregory et al 1968). The British presence frequently consisted of little more than a patrol of the Kenya Police or the King's African Rifles, one or two clerks, or the District Commissioner on his occasional visits. Such contacts as there were between the local population and the colonial administration tended to be mediated through the chiefs and headmen (Garissa Annual Report 1923 TRD/1).

The concept of "chiefdom" was introduced to the Orma in the early 1920s by the British in order to establish a means of indirect rule. The chief was to be the local arm of British authority and at the same time the representative of his "constituency" to the central government. He was supposed to collect taxes when these were imposed, and to see to it that government regulations relating to grazing boundaries and hunting were followed (Garissa Annual Report 1923 TRD/1). When conflict occurred between neighboring tribal groups or between different clans of the Orma, the chief was supposed to mediate or arrange negotiations.

Even though Orma culture and society in the 1920s is likely to have been comparatively unaffected by the sort of economic and social change that came later, there was in this period the beginning of an economic transformation of the area, specifically in the growth of small trading centers. The main ones were scattered both inland from and along the course of the Tana River at Garissa, Korokoro, Wayu, Chifiri, Bura, Hola and Garsen. British colonization had brought an end to the traditional caravan trade of the Somali and Arab merchants, partly as a result of the construction of roads, which made motor traffic possible, and partly through the granting of privileges to sedentary traders (who tended to be Somalis, Arabs and Asians) stationed at the colonial outposts. British policy had the effect of redirecting the NFD trade towards the Kenya interior rather than the Benadir coast where it had previously been oriented. The growth of small trading centers was expected to stabilize the nomadic population (Dalleo 1975: 142). In particular, it was hoped that this would be a method of "anchoring" the restless Somali groups to specific areas. Later on, the running of the big trading centers came to be regarded as a costly burden on the colonial government, and the latter tried to restrict licensed commerce to a few traders based in these centers, rather than letting the centers grow too fast or allowing the trade to be spread into the rural areas by itinerant merchants. The small trading towns were usually located with an administrative eye to health conditions, water supplies, existing caravan routes, etc.

Up through to the mid-1920s, the material needs of the officers, clerks and soldiers of the British administration had been covered by a government commissary. From around 1926, however, traders were encouraged to provide the necessary goods. Dalleo writes that "the *duka* trade began primarily as a supply source for administrative staff and troops, with only a small portion of the goods included to attract the nomads. Its main items were tea, sugar, *posho* (maize meal), cloth, kitchenware, utensils and canned goods" (Dalleo 1975: 144). Trading centers could act as subordinate police and chiefly posts and thus support the administration by providing a base for some control over the affairs of the nomads.

During the initial years of the *duka* trade only merchants with access to capital could venture into commerce. The main reason for this concerned regulations stating that shop buildings must be built of stone (and thus, costing 1200 KSH to 1500 KSH) and that the trader must show proof of 5000 KSH working capital. Lower fees for trading licenses were charged in the NFD than down country, however, and the British tried to encourage Indian and Arab merchants to come to the area to compete with the Somali traders already there (Dalleo 1975: 144).

Most of the trade took the form of exchanges in kind, since it was live animals and skins that were exacted from the nomads by the government. *Duka* owners were given hides, skins, ghee or small stock in payment for goods and they traded these things down country for additional profit. In 1930 the British introduced cash taxation as an alternative to payment in the form of livestock (Garissa Annual Report 1930 TRD/1). From 1935 all taxes had to be paid in terms of money, and exchanges in kind between retail traders and their customers were prohibited. (Badawy 1988: personal communication). In the North as well as in other parts of Kenya, the introduction of hut and poll taxes led to an increased demand for wage labour. Remunerated employment was not popular among the pastoralists of the North, who generally accepted employment only as soldiers and policemen. One reason for this was that the pastoralists could sell sheep, goats and skins as a means of acquiring cash.

Nevertheless, the nomads became increasingly eager for the consumer goods to be found in the retail shops supplying the administrative centers with necessities. Indeed, the demand for these goods became so great that the Kenyan administration felt that "threats to suspend the supply of tea and sugar" could be used as a political weapon to reduce the incidence of inter-tribal feuding (Smith 1965: 35). It was, however, considerably later in the early 1940s before any Orma attempted to start up as shopkeepers or became closely tied to the town (Ensminger 1984: 58).

In the early 1930s, both the white settlers of Kenya and the indigenous farmers met with great economic difficulties. These stemmed partly from the worldwide depression, but also from the adverse effects of land and labour losses which had started to become apparent in the areas dominated by traditional African cultivators. Political unrest among the rural poor and soil erosion were two problems which worried the dominant European group.

The Kenyan settler economy was based on access to cheap labour. Such labour could be secured only when the wages of agricultural labourers were supplemented by incomes from their rural homes. Thus, in a sense, even the settlers were dependent on an indigenous agriculture which was still operating well enough to support cheap labour.

This newly felt concern for the conditions under which African farmers lived extended likewise into the pastoral sector. The principal government agency dealing with the economy of these areas was the Veterinary Department, which was largely responsive to settler interests. This department saw erosion and overstocking as the biggest problems facing the arid regions. The colonial authorities put the blame for excess stock numbers on the lack of cattle marketing facilities, for which, ironically, they themselves had been responsible. This theory that marketing facilities could lead to substantial reductions in stock numbers might be challenged on the grounds that marketing presupposes sales which are not just a substitute for normal slaughter for domestic consumption, but also involve the sale of reproductive stock. In practice, this is rarely the case.

Whether valid or not, this colonial appraisal of the situation led to a shared understanding among both administrators and settlers that the pastoral herds needed to be reduced in size, either by trading them off or by forcible confiscation. One problem was to find a market where low quality meat from indigenous cattle would not compete with the higher quality produce emanating from the settlers' ranches which had begun to produce for market sale by the 1930s. Another was to identify stock routes where there was no risk of disease transmission to European stock.

### The Northern Livestock Trade

The Lamu market was seen as one possible solution to the problem especially when, during a short period from 1936-38, the Lamu trade was booming as a result of the Italo-Ethiopian war. From Lamu, cattle and small stock were taken by dhow to the Somali port of Kismayu. But this Italian demand, closely linked to the invasion of Abyssinia, was soon over, and Lamu harbor was no longer able to maintain a significant level of export traffic. Neither could Lamu cope with steamer traffic nor compete with Kismayu for the long distance trade to the Arabian peninsula (see Martin 1979: 23-28). The neighboring markets of Mombasa and Zanzibar had closer and better supplies of high quality meat from the Maasai and highland areas.

In 1938 the British authorities decided to create an internal outlet for pastoral stock in the form of a meat cannery at Athi River, just south of Nairobi. The Liebig Company was invited to undertake the administration and operation of the plant. Through this arrangement, it was felt that the entry of indigenous stock into the market where "European" beef was sold, could be avoided and, at the same time, that there would be a steady demand for low-price slaughter stock. In the end, it was found that the policy of destocking and Liebig's demand for raw material for corned beef could be fulfilled only through enforced sales or confiscation.

At the outbreak of World War II, the government intervened once again to redirect the trade toward meeting the army's need for beef rather than Liebig's. The Kenya Meat Supply Board (KMSB) bought up large numbers of cattle and sheep for processing. The peak came in 1942, when 255,000 sheep and goats and 20,000 cattle were sold from the NFD. The army offered quite high prices, with a unit price per animal irrespective of its quality, which was at that time favorable to the pastoralists; with such a policy the army hoped to lessen their opposition to the enforced sales.

After the war, a civilian agency, the Meat Marketing Board (MMB), which functioned under the Veterinary Department, was given the task of organizing livestock sales. It put a

stop to the enforced sales, but retained a monopoly over the trade, offering low fixed prices. The Somali traders, who had once worked over great distances, now ended up as middlemen between the MMB auctioneers and the Orma livestock owners, or as smugglers of illegal stock in the bush east of Mount Kenya.

In 1952, another new organization, called the African Livestock Marketing Organization (ALMO), was set up. ALMO was to be the main instrument for a new policy, officially guided by the twin needs to destock the arid areas and to provide cheap meat for the agricultural areas around Mount Kenya as well as the meat canning factory at Athi River. A minimum price per animal sold was offered in an (unsuccessful) attempt to prevent middlemen traders from manipulating prices to the disadvantage of the Orma pastoralists. ALMO constructed stock routes which would keep indigenous stock at a suitable distance from herds owned by the white settlers. Veterinary measures such as tick control, tsetse clearance and inoculation were introduced into the pastoral areas. Some measures were also taken to combat soil erosion in Wajir, Isiolo, Garissa, Samburu and Tana River Districts. The *Mau Mau* Emergency, however, closed the Kikuyu market in Central province. For long periods, emergency regulations were used by the British, to justify an ALMO monopoly of exports from the northern districts. In the late 1950s, when the Emergency had ended, traders from Garissa and Kikuyuland were, from time to time, allowed to compete with ALMO and the Isiolo Somali at the Garba Tula market. Orma herdsmen were not altogether satisfied with the new marketing measures for they were not happy with ALMO's pricing policy. The spread of cattle diseases along the stock routes within the pastoral areas also created discontent. Nevertheless, ALMO trade grew continuously during the 1950s and early 1960s, especially when five- to seven-ton doubledecker diesel trucks were introduced in 1957 to transport small stock over long distances.

The period during and after World War II, with its high demand for cattle, altered the profile of Orma society. Deliberate new attempts were made to back up the authority of

chiefs and headmen and fresh fields of activity also opened up, which made it possible for an elite stratum of Orma leaders to differentiate themselves from the common herdowners and emerge as a new economic force in Tana society.

The 1930s and 1940s era saw an increased involvement in the cash economy, in military and quasi-military service, in the cattle trade and in retail barriers. Individual Orma began to venture into the Somali-dominanted local livestock trade. Occasionally, some Orma traders drove stock long distances to far-away markets, usually Lamu.

The early Orma traders appear not to have been specialized stock traders, however, and were at a disadvantage as compared with the Isaaq and Herti, who had widespread networks of transport and trading contacts, greater initial knowledge of Swahili and the tricks of the trade, plus the liquidity of merchants' capital to use wherever there was an opportunity. Orma traders bought mainly small quantities of animals for resale either to ALMO or to Somali middlemen. Some of them were retail merchants in a strategic geographical position, who could both meet people in need of cash and get information on marketing opportunities. Or they were Army men and *askaris* who had invested their earnings and labour in trading stock only to use the proceeds to establish themselves more firmly as herdowners.

The war had meant an increased number of unskilled jobs of a sort acceptable to the Orma. The families of chiefs and tribal leaders appear to have been favored in regard to access to employment as soldiers, policemen, grazing guards and game scouts. Before World War II, only a few Orma chiefs and headmen and a number of local policemen had been living in the towns, and it was not until the postwar period that Orma began to become engaged in retail trade in any numbers. Though it was mainly the families of chiefs and headmen who had the resources to open a *duka*, the British barred these relatives of governmental officials from opening shops. However, in the 1950s, the British administration reversed the policy which forbade chiefs or their families to operate local shops, and introduced a new policy of directly favoring local traders (Dyson-Hudson 1980:

49). This was part of a country-wide attempt to encourage economic entrepreneurship in traditional African areas. This administrative change led to a development in which trade came to be inexorably linked to both economic and political power. The abundance of cash during the war years had done much to make retail trade both economically attractive and honorable in the eyes of pastoralists. Today, most of what can be referred to as "elite" culture within Orma society is specifically linked to town models provided by Indian, Arab and Somali traders.

### Concluding Statements

This chapter has had a dual purpose. The first was to survey the work previously undertaken on the Oromo by providing a literature review. It is obvious that while a great deal has been written on the Oromo (particularly the Boran) in both a historical and contemporary setting, little has been said about the Orma. The second purpose was to place the Orma within the historical processes of East Africa. Again our knowledge is limited. However, we can say with some confidence that the Orma, like all their neighbors, became increasingly involved since their colonization in the market economy. They had come to depend more and more on an increasingly diverse range of imported consumer goods such as trade-cloth, tea, sugar, edible oils, coffee beans, tobacco, maize, flashlights, etc., and have, in turn, sold more and more stock in order to obtain them.

Nevertheless, one does sense that the Orma remained on the periphery to many of the situations and occurrences in this area. They appeared to be quite content to carry on with their lives in as traditional a manner as possible. The next chapter will detail and discuss the traditional life of the Orma. It is a way of life that, although disappearing, remains the ideal if not the practice for many Orma today.

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## Chapter Four

### Traditional Orma Social Organization

#### Introduction

In the context of contemporary processes of national integration, developmental aid and involvement within the world market economy, and with the resultant socio-economic changes in traditional patterns, both the availability of livestock to feed people and of the labour to tend that livestock may undergo marked fluctuations that will upset any time-tested ecological adaptation. When trying to grasp the mechanisms which lead to the replication or transformation of a pastoral society and its particular life patterns, it is necessary first and foremost to outline the basic features of the traditional lifestyle and social organization.

What follows is a survey of the main parameters of traditional Orma society reconstructed from classic monographs on various Oromiyya-speaking peoples in addition to the recollections and oral traditions of Orma men presently living in the Tana River District. The bulk of the information that follows is both public record and public knowledge. Monographs on neighboring societies like the Borana, Samburu, Rendille, Gabbra and Somali are particularly helpful since they provide insights into the pastoral peoples who inhabit similar environments and who have similar pastoral techniques. The various works on the Borana are particularly instructive since they, like the Orma, remain a pastoral Oromo people. Indeed, Borana are regarded by all Oromo as *angafa*, or the "first-born" (Levine 1974: 135) and are living role models for all Oromo peoples today. The Somali and Rendille intrusion into a position between the Orma and Borana apparently came at a relatively recent date, perhaps as close as 70 years ago (see Fedders & Salvadori 1980: 35, Huntingford 1955: 201) so that observations in Boran society can, with a fair degree of reliability, be extended to the Orma of Kenya. What follows therefore, is a

reconstruction of Orma economy and society as it likely existed in the early years of this century.

### Camp and Household Life

The basic unit of Orma social structure was the homestead or *worra*. The *worra* could be a simple family unit consisting of a man and his wife and children, or an extended one including the sub-households of several wives, of married sons and daughters and of various female dependents related to the herdowner through other agnatic or affinal links. Each adult woman had a dwelling (hut) of her own and, hence sizes of homesteads varied with the number of female dependents attached to the homestead head.

(Before proceeding it might be useful to interject and provide a brief description of a typical Orma dwelling. This description consists mainly of personal observations gathered when I resided for a two week period in an Orma *worra*.. An Orma hut is made of wood and skins. After a suitable spot is chosen, the beds are placed on the ground and holes dug around them in a circle. Two or three long sticks are planted in these holes, and their tops bent to meet at the apex. Ropes are then wound round these sticks to link them together. Other sticks, bent into semicircles, are tied across to provide a strong support for the framework. Next, thatch is woven from the middle of young doum palms. These are placed on the framework until the whole hut is covered. About twenty-five to forty pieces of such thatch are needed to construct one hut, the average size of each being about 1 to 1.5 metres. In order to prevent the hut from collapsing during the inevitable wind and thunderstorms, supporting poles are placed in the centre and at the rear of the hut.

The hut is divided down into the middle into two sections. There is a bed on each side of the rear part, and this bedroom is separated separated from the living space by a wall of hides and skins. The area at the front contains a fireplace and is often used as a place to tether calves, lambs and their offspring, especially during storms.

It is a conglomeration of these huts which constitute a homestead. The homestead head was called an *aba worra* or, "father of the homestead". The *aba worra* was usually the actual genitor of the children of the homestead but he would also assume the role as *aba* (pater) to all members residing near him including all livestock on site. A homestead thus can be said to consist of mutually dependent people and stock; you cannot have one without the other.

During the rains when there was abundant grazing and surface water and the various cattle and camel herds could be kept relatively dispersed, the labour force of a single homestead enabling it to be self-sufficient. Indeed, the single homestead was likely the most efficient unit for the exploitation of scattered desert grazing which could not support a greater density of livestock. *Fora* herds, or those animals not producing milk or bearing young, were maintained by unmarried older sons in areas far from camp while the *hawicha* herds (those producing milk and bearing calves) sustained the members of the homestead. As a result, most homesteads remained on their own, or in pairs, throughout the year grazing in the peripheral areas of the Tana and its tributaries. But, except during the rainy season (or *ganna*), the proper care of cattle and camels demanded labour resources greater than that which any single homestead could usually supply. Labour shortage was thus endemic. This was most apparent at the watering of stock from the deep wells or rivers whereby several able bodied persons were required to either lift the containers of water and swing them up in a vertical bucket chain to the trough or to maintain an orderly approach, drinking time and departure of the parched flocks and herds. This was always demanding and fatiguing labour which usually occurred just when milk supplies were at their lowest. *Bona*, or dry season, watering required the coordinated labour of a number of households and these would settle together to form a village. In some areas homesteads also came together into "villages" for protection against raiders and lions.

A village (or *ganda*) commonly consisted of from four to eight homesteads, including the stock which each homestead managed and from which it subsisted (Baxter 1978: 164).

The homesteads that clustered together to form a *ganda* did so because, at that particular time, it suited them to do so; any homestead whose head perceived it as advantageous to move off and join another *ganda* was free to go (Baxter 1978: 164). The reasons for joining and staying in one *ganda*, as opposed to another, ranged from simple congeniality through useful mutual assistance to dependence verging on clientage. Each *ganda* took its name from its "father" (*aba*), who was likely to be a man of more than average wealth and possessing other attributes of character which enabled him to maintain a semi-permanent core of a few households around him. The broad pattern, then, was a dispersal of homesteads during the rains and a concentration into villages sited near permanent water supplies in the dry season. The *fora* herds were "satellite camps" in a continual state of flux around the *worras* and *gandas*.

#### Cattle, camels, sheep and goats

Traditionally, Orma did not practice cultivation; nor did they normally engage in hunting and gathering, though they did resort to hunting and gathering in times of famine to provide much of their subsistence. Orma men, women and children, like their pastoral neighbors and competitors, drove themselves, endured any hardships and risked any danger in the service of their herds and flocks but regarded tilling the soil or selling their labour as undignified (see Dyson-Hudson 1980: 18-19, Spooner 1973: 19). Indeed, in 1952, the Orma reportedly boasted that not one of them registered in Garissa District was in paid employment except as a soldier, policeman or in an equivalent "manly" occupation (Baxter 1979: 75). They did not depend on their stock for domestic utensils or fuels to the extent of, for example, the Nuer (see Evans-Pritchard 1940: 28-29), but they did depend on them absolutely for the milk, blood and meat on which they subsisted. Milk (*aannan*) from cattle, goats and camels provided the basis of their diet but, since the amount of milk varied with changes in pasture conditions during the year, it was necessary to supplement this

staple with other products. Blood from live animals was an important addition in the dry season, and meat played the dual role of a reserve food and a luxury. There was also trade between the Orma and various farming peoples. The agricultural produce brought in by this trade, however, served as an addition to, rather than a staple of, the Orma diet.

Agricultural products were mainly consumed during the dry season when there was an accumulation of people, both nomads and farmers, near permanent sources of water. In the rainy season, the pastoral families were usually able to subsist off the products of their herds (see Dyson-Hudson 1980: 18-19, Baxter 1975: 207) and by trading intermittently with any settled peoples they may have come across.

Under "stock", I include cattle and camels, neither of which was herded, fenced or tethered together, as well as sheep and goats which were shepherded and penned in the same location. Cattle were the essential livestock in the pastoral life of the Orma. Camels were also highly valued but not to the same degree as cattle. The Orma viewed sheep and goats as being of equivalent value and utility to each other and I shall refer to these animals as "small stock".<sup>1</sup> Orma also kept horses, mules, donkeys, dogs and, very occasionally, chickens.

Not only were cattle the mainstay of their subsistence, they were the source of their constant joy and abiding passion (Herskovits 1926: 255-272). For the Orma, cattle-keeping was a key symbol and value and contributed to a feeling that transcended the practical considerations of food and of material wealth alone (Weissleder 1978: 106). Indeed, it was a sentiment shared in the past by all the Oromiyya-speaking peoples who descended from the highlands of southern Ethiopia, where they had practiced mixed

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<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, in addition to their subsistence use for hospitality and ritual purposes as well as a meat reserve in the dry season when the yield is decreased, they are also equivalent to a cash crop, and are sold to provide money for clothes, tax, tea, sugar, maize meal and tobacco.

agriculture, to the lowland savannas and arid zones, where the environment was better suited for pastoralism than cultivation (Legesse 1973: 8-10, 15-17).

All stock was owned by males and, in theory at least, inherited strictly through the patriline (*gogessa*). All but certain specified animals were passed to the eldest son, the *angafa*, who managed them on behalf of a lineal group by allocating them out to younger brothers, kinsmen, age-mates and other pastoral partners. Women could own male or infertile animals but not breeding stock. Stated as jural deals, these rules appear to be fairly simple and straightforward, but, obviously, their application would have entailed many subtleties and variants.

### Movement and Mobility

In preceding sections the point has been made that the unpredictability of nature had placed its stamp on the Tana River District and almost certainly must have contributed to the continuous reshuffling of ethnic groups which this area has witnessed during the last century or so. Ecological hazards likewise affected the strategies of individual households, whose members continually have to expect the unexpected and gear their activities toward risk reduction over the mid- to long-term rather than betting on maximum profits at any particular time. The hazard of the Orma environment threatened the continuity of the family economy both at the level of immediate food production and at the level of access to capital. In their household strategies the Orma had to avoid any temporary slackening in milk production by making sure that they had access to milk-producing animals throughout the course of the year in addition to avoiding losses of livestock during the dry periods especially towards the end of the season when water supplies were at their lowest. They had constantly to be prepared to move to alternate food and water sources from which they and their capital could be renewed and regenerated.

Only by continuously moving their stock in accordance with both seasonal changes and rainfall could the Orma assure their animals of the quantity and quality of fodder and water

necessary for the production of milk and for the survival and regeneration of livestock capital. As I stated earlier, rainfall in Ormland tends to be generally concentrated in two seasons. Exactly where and when rainfall occurs, however, was highly unpredictable. A direct adaptation to this natural fact was that the grazing was owned communally by all tribal members, or rather, according to the elders, was open to anyone who was not one of the Orma's enemies (see also Baxter 1966a: 236, 240). However, Orma were not nomadic in the sense of being permanently on the move with their camps following the livestock, and particularly not the cattle people who were in an absolute majority among the Orma pastoralists. The dominant pattern of migration appears to have been similar to what Salzman (1967: 121) refers to as "epicyclical", a movement in adjustment to an unpredictable distribution of pasture and water. The animals were kept mobile, but the main camps were stationary so long as conditions would permit. Sometimes this meant that the main camp was moved once or twice every season, but in other cases the household remained in the same place for a couple of years or even a decade if conditions were favorable. It was not really possible to predict in which direction movement would take place. The general direction of movements season by season may have been regular, but the households did not follow permanent routes as in areas with several different dependable climatic zones (see Irons 1972).

The main point to be made here, however, is that in an area with a very unpredictable climate, as with the Orma case, land which is useful for pasture today may be wasteland tomorrow. Therefore, political and economic dominance cannot be based on control over parts of the migratory route. In the colonial and post-colonial periods changes in land control have created problems for the Orma and similar nomads, but then the problem has rather been one of total exclusion from certain areas. This particularly concerns areas which are normally of little importance for pastoral production but which could be of increased significance in years of drought when they serve as famine refuges.

Minor changes in camp site were regularly undertaken in traditional Orma pastoralism which had the consequence of avoiding the health hazards brought about by residing in an area where cattle and people had been defecating over a long period, or to lessen the walking distance that firewood or household water was to be carried. Camel camps were usually moved more frequently than were the cattle camps, even twice or three times a month in order to avoid tick infections spread by camel dung. Among the cattle people there was sufficient permanency in the composition of a group using a particular area to allow for the vague notion of a "grazing community", a *deda*, which comprised several households habitually using the same permanent pastures. Long distant camp migrations from one location to another were made mainly in response to either social considerations or to large-scale climatic irregularities in addition to any moves directly resulting from warfare and subjugation by foreign powers and hostile groups.

#### Livestock and the Orma

The constant concern of every Orma was at minimum to maintain, and preferably, to increase through good management, the herds and flocks in which they had an interest. Orma hold that stock generally thrived best and the grazing and water more efficiently exploited when the family herd was divided into milch cattle, dry cattle, milch camels, dry camels, and a flock of sheep and goats. Each of these animals could, in that order, subsist on less frequent watering and coarser graze or browse and thus they tended to be herded separately. But to manage this, one needed to have a diversified labour force which once again brings us to the chronic labour shortage of Orma pastoralism. Orma tended to value their livestock in that order as well. Every family would like to have owned enough of each of the five categories of stock to make up a separate herd of each but, obviously, this is a paradigm of a pastoral ideal. Even at its peak point in the domestic cycle a family could rarely achieve such a comfortable and independent position exclusively through its own resources of stock and personnel. Nonetheless, most stock-owning families retained at

least some animals of each type and it was customary for the adult males of a family to live with the herd or flock which accorded with their status in the family, that is, older brothers herding cattle and camels while younger brothers cared for the sheep and goats (see Baxter 1966b: 118). As a result, close agnates, particularly brothers, usually resided in different and often widely dispersed locations throughout Orma territory.

Thus one of the primary strategies of Orma range and herd management practices was to divide the flocks and herds into sub-units known as *fora* and *hawicha* animals. The *hawicha* herd were the milk animals that were maintained close to the main camp. The *fora* herd was predominantly a "fallow" herd consisting of dry stock which was more or less constantly on the move so as to exploit available pastures to the maximum. In the rainy season these were pastures that had only temporary pools of water and, in the dry season, grazing in the riverine zones. Such areas were usually further than one day's travel away from the main camp. Normally, the *fora* contained most of the male stock (which were bled for a food source), the immature and aged cattle, all the cattle that were currently not producing milk, as well as a few milk cows to provide sustenance for the herdsman. The *fora* herd was, therefore more or less permanently separated from the main camp. The young men who followed and cared for the *fora* herds usually constructed makeshift shelters (called an *ola*) or slept in the open exposed to the elements. Most of their time and energy were expended on providing and caring for the herd rather than for their own comfort. The *fora* was also an important time in young men's lives as it was among the Boran during this period as they became active members of the age- and generation-grading *gada* system. *Fora* was the period of apprenticeship whereby young men learned the skills necessary to be both efficient warriors and skilled herd managers.

The mobility of *hawicha* cattle was limited not only by the obvious desirability of avoiding laborious camp shifts, but also by the dams' need to stay close to their rather immobile young calves, and to have regular access to water every one or two days. A few oxen and bulls were also kept with the *hawicha* and were used primarily for bleeding and

for slaughter for either subsistence or ritual purposes. At night, the *hawicha* were kept within a thorn enclosure inside the camp itself and were taken out to graze early in the morning. When there was little forage, the herders (usually older household heads, their young sons and, occasionally, women and young girls) took these milk animals to a water source every other day, alternating between going to a well or river and to pastures in the opposite direction. The area that could be exploited from the camp itself was quite limited when travel and grazing time for the animals were taken into consideration. The maximum distance of each daily journey was probably around 12 km, although cattle could, in exceptional circumstances, walk up to 30 km per day (Dahl & Hjort 1976: 238-241). The watering point was usually situated closer to camp, for on watering days the cattle had to be allowed time for both grazing and drinking.

Flocks of small stock and camel herds were separated in the same manner as the cattle. Sheep and goats were generally handled together and referred to as *re*, and these flocks were divided into *fora* and *hawicha* only if they were very large. A small flock was important for family subsistence and could be kept undivided in the vicinity of the camp, while a person wealthy in cattle who also had a large flock of sheep and goats was likely to send it all out as *fora*.

On a general level, the daily circuits of *hawicha* stock and the far-reaching routes of the *fora* were governed by their respective managers' judgement of the availability of fresh grazing and water. The operation of this pasture concept was, however, much more intricate than is apparent from such an over-simplified statement, and the decisions on itineraries implied complicated considerations. Essentially, the strategy of a stock herder was to delay, for as long as possible, the use of permanent water points. This was done not so much for fear that these supplies would become exhausted, as to preserve the limited grazing (within range of each water source) throughout the year. It was this need to maintain the maximum number of head of stock in an arid environment with meagre natural resources which, in the final analysis, imposed upon the pastoral Orma a nomadic mode of

life. A stock manager had to be considering not only his immediate grazing and watering needs, but where he was going to next and how he was going to get his stock there. The well-being and increase, present and future, of the stock in his care from which his family subsisted was a man's major preoccupation in life.

### Pastoral Labour

In the traditional livestock economy of the Orma, most production relations were based on kinship. The majority of the labour that a particular stockowner and his household would utilize for their exploitation of herds, pasture and water tended to be provided by the family members themselves. A large part of the routine tasks were carried out by young men, boys and girls, who were at the same time being socialized into their adult roles, and gradually receiving greater responsibilities within their respective spheres of labour. A herdowner had to apply demographic foresight to his herds and ensure that there would be enough calves to provide milk cows at a later date. Rather than striving to achieve viability for the family herd enterprise based on a static balance between human and animal resources, the Orma household, it appears, endeavoured to attain an evenly balanced growth in which family sizes would increase along with the herds needed to support the greater population. Larger livestock holdings made it easier to reduce the risk of total loss through the specialization of husbandry and through increased mobility, while fertility and the proliferation of children were cherished values (see Singer & Wood 1978: 98, Legesse 1973: 25). For example, a wealthy Orma man could convert an accumulated surplus of animals into additional sources of labour either by marrying a new wife or by arranging for his son to marry. The bridewealth cattle were thus transformed into a labour resource, consisting of the immediate extra labour that the incoming woman represented in addition to the children that she would bear. Families with no children were eager to "adopt" from others more prolific (Legesse 1973: 27).

Where there were children or other subordinate household members available for certain tasks it was, without exception, cheaper to use the labour of family members than to employ extra-domestic herdsmen. There appear to have been few other more profitable uses of the labour and time of the members of a pastoral household than to invest them in pastoralism.

There were many reasons for a herdowner to depend predominantly on people with whom he had close links of kinship or affinity. To put it simply, non-kin could not be trusted because they were considered to be competitors. It was only kin that would have convergent interests in the welfare of the livestock holdings. There were also reasons which had to do with the character of livestock property - primarily that animals are both mobile and edible (Barth 1964: 71). During earlier periods, when communication over tribal and linguistic boundaries was less well developed, and when the police service had hardly any roads, equipment and informants at its command, an employee could easily abscond with the animals from his employers herd. Productive animals were generally not slaughtered by Orma herdowners except in critical situations when it was necessary to consume capital in order to survive (see Spencer 1965: 4), or when the animals appeared likely to die in any case. The herdowner who entrusted animals to non-kin ran the risk that animals might be falsely declared sick or dead of accidental causes. Of course, this represented a significant loss of capital. Milk could also be misappropriated. Likewise, if too much milk was consumed at the expense of the calves, the regrowth of the herd would be endangered (Dahl & Hjort 1976: 145). Both problems of supervision and social control were thus easier to solve within the context of kinship and household obligations.

Apart from the direct risk of theft or overconsumption of milk, there was also the cost of the herdsman's salary. In northern Kenya the traditional wage of a herdsman employed to look after cattle was two immatures (one of which was a heifer) per year, a norm accepted

by the Borana, Orma and Somali (Dahl 1979: 272-273, Ensminger 1984: 137).<sup>2</sup> To the heifer was added the milk the herdsmen needed for his own, and at times his family's, personal and domestic consumption during his term of employment.

Although it is very difficult to make a realistic assessment, this form of contract suggests that there was no permanent reservoir of people who were constrained to resort to wage employment as herdsmen in order to survive. Traditionally the rule governing this type of contract was that labour should be exchanged not merely for "means of consumption" but directly for "means of production". In this context it is important to think of the cow not just as a milk producer but also as a reproducer of capital, one aspect of this being that the poor herdsman, with a certain amount of skill and luck, could establish or, more likely, re-establish himself as an independent herdowner, since he was, in most cases, an independent herdsman in his own right, temporarily down on his luck.

By expending a reproductive animal on the employment of a herdsman, the herdowner lost the animal and her offspring and gained only a temporary solution to his labour problems. From the point of view of the family's continued economic viability, animals were thus much better invested in building up family labour resources through bridewealth than in employing herdsmen. One exception to this general rule would be if the herdsman were "adopted" and incorporated into the herdowner's household, perhaps even as a clan-member or son-in-law. According to my oral sources this appears to have occurred quite frequently, especially when the employee was recruited from another ethnic group. In fact, the status of a herdsman who receives reproductive stock from his employer is not significantly different in character from that of a son vis-a-vis his father.

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<sup>2</sup> Among the camel-rearing Rendille (Spencer 1973: 40) it was one heifer camel every second year. The difference reflects the relative values of camels versus cattle: camels, from the point of productivity, are worth as much as two and one-half times a cow (Dahl & Hjort 1976: 229).

### Livestock in Northern Kenya

Of great importance for an understanding of subsistence pastoralism are the distinctions between reproductive and non-reproductive stock, and between production aspects of animals on the one hand and capital aspects on the other. Admittedly it can be disputed whether "capital" is an appropriate term to be used in a non-market context, yet several anthropologists writing on pastoralism have talked about livestock as "capital" (Barth 1964, Paine 1971 and Schneider 1974 & 1981) and I shall use this term for lack of any more suitable formula for the concrete property in which reproductive value is vested.

By the capital aspect of livestock I refer to the fact that, unlike land, animal herds can reproduce and multiply. Female animals not only produce milk (and eventually meat) for consumption, but also give birth to new producers of milk and meat. Reproduction rates are, of course, variable. Cattle herds do not increase at the same rapid rate as small stock. Indeed, the difference could be as great as between a 3% (the normal cattle reproduction rate of East African cattle) and an annual increase of 20-40% among sheep and goats (Dahl & Hjort 1976: 259, 262). Nevertheless, the value of each unit of cattle becomes much larger than that of a sheep or goat (see Spencer 1965: 23) owing to the productive capacity of each cow and to their inestimable worth in the social life of the pastoralists. In northern Kenya small stock were kept principally as a subsidiary to cattle or camel raising. Having herds consisting only of sheep and goats was often regarded as a temporary condition, a means to a more important end: as a start to rapidly increase his stock. When flocks were large enough they were exchanged for cattle, which are normally hardier and, hence, represent less of a risk than keeping small stock in this environment. Although the possible growth rate of cattle herds is often exaggerated, someone with relatively few animals could develop a considerable herd over time, especially if he was lucky enough to have a favorably biased sex-ratio among his calves. Other herdowners saw their herds dwindle as a result of too many bull births. In spite of luck there were, however practical, limits to the number of cattle that could be owned by the same person. Ecological

constraints made it impossible to keep more than 200-300 animals in the same herd, and the maximum number of separate herds, as we have seen, was dependent on the access to labour (Dahl & Hjort 1976: 251, 256).

A second characteristic of the herd as capital is that there was a continuous risk for total or partial loss due to their mobility which made them easy prey for rustlers and also to the unpredictability of climatic conditions and disease. One reason commonly stated for a kind of equality in nomadic societies is that nature strikes in random fashion affecting the poor and wealthy alike. Although it was true that someone who was rich one day could be poor the next, such a statement must be qualified. To begin with, when a man had many animals, he avoided placing all his "eggs in the same basket" by keeping all animals in the same area. Instead, he tried to disperse them so that if, for example, a local epizootic disease ravaged a certain area, he would still have livestock remaining elsewhere.

#### Milk-Managers and Mothers

It is obvious that the traditional Orma male role was distinguished by a preoccupation with livestock, ideally changing over a man's lifetime from a concern with practical tasks of herd care towards policy-making and administration of herding and husbandry. Women's involvement in practical herd management, on the other hand, was normally restricted to tasks that could be carried out in the immediate vicinity of the camp. In other words, to the care of very young or sick animals which had to remain in the camp, to the handling of milk cattle when they returned from the pastures, and to the herding of small stock when they grazed near the camp. Outside the homestead, the traditional division of labour mandated women to participate in the care of animals only when there was a shortage of male labour.

On the whole, there was a strong association between all aspects of herd management and the male sphere of labour, and between activities oriented around the homestead and

the female sphere (Legesse 1973: 19-23). Significantly, men constructed the cattle fences and women built the huts. When the family arrived at its destination, all the women immediately start the construction of the huts. I was told that even today no man will ever be seen helping a women in putting up or taking down a hut. To help in this instance would be, according to most men, quite undignified. This general pattern was not peculiar to the Orma but, rather, a characteristic of many if not most African societies with a predominantly pastoral adaptation. This might be seen as the consequence of the incompatibility of child care and pregnancy with the mobility and irregularity involved in herding. For an Orma woman, the roles and responsibility of bearing and caring for children occupied a significant majority of her adult life. A woman's mobility was restricted by these occurrences and it follows that the general female role should be adapted to the needs of the child-rearing period. Bearing children and caring for them not only restricted a woman's mobility, but was the very axis about which they revolved. The division between herd/male and camp/female was not only expressed in the division of labour but also in the division of authority. All household goods such as hut equipment, milk pots, stools, beds and utensils belonged exclusively to women. When it came to livestock and herding strategies it appears that Orma women rarely participated, except as conveyors of any information on pasture and weather conditions that they might happen to overhear. With regard to husbandry decisions, their roles and duties tended to be subordinate to those of men. Only in relation to a limited part of the household herd could a woman challenge the authority of her husband.

It was in the "housekeeping" field of decisions, which affected livestock, the home and camp, in which the Orma woman had a more or less clearly defined sphere of authority. Planning the allocation of the products from the herd for different purposes and for the benefit of different consumers was left in the hands of the Orma wife. In particular it was her duty to make sure that there remained enough milk for the calves, whose survival was necessary for the family's future access to milk, and for the children who grew up to be the

heirs and helpers in the pastoral undertakings. "Housekeeping" implied a concern for the reproduction of production assets in more ways than one. The woman had to balance the family's current needs with their wants at a future date, both in the short-term perspective of storing some meat and milk if she could, and in the long-term perspective of not endangering the future reproduction of the herd by overmilking. The Orma wife was also expected to economize so that she always had a reserve of food to offer to any guest who might visit the family in accordance with Orma norms of hospitality.

Although women were said to "own" food products, particularly milk, they could generally only gain access to them by being attached to a man either as daughter, wife or as a widow cared for by her sons (see Ensminger 1984: 130). Motherhood established the range of potential guardians to whom a woman had access and also ordained the relationship she could maintain with them, whether she lived with a man who owed her the loyalty of a son, with one whose children she bore and cared for, or one whose infant wards she mothered. As long as her children were young, not even they were under her own exclusive control: they legally belonged to her husband rather than to her, and, after his death, to their father's agnatic group. It was only the adult children that she had actually brought up that were irrevocably "hers" and who were culturally defined as being indebted to her for this care, even though in actual practice such children did not always live up to these expectations (Baxter 1986: personal communication). A woman could thus to some extent ensure her future by building up a large following of adult children and by simultaneously cultivating her own agnatic links. Fraternal and filial solidarity would guarantee her a minimal subsistence in old age. Other values, such as a high relative status of influence and respect within the homestead where she resided, could only be safeguarded by the woman if she continuously took on the care of new infants and actively participated in the physical and social reproduction of labour.

### Concluding Remarks

The well-being and contentment of both livestock and family was, obviously, of the utmost concern to traditional pastoral Orma. While the preceding information was not intended as a comprehensive description of the traditional Orma lifestyle it does provide a basic outline of the most important aspects of their lives. The nomadic lifestyle of the Orma was one that was closely adapted to their environment and one in which a satisfying existence could be maintained. Elders today recall nostalgically the sense of security they had in growing up in the *worra*, moving out and becoming a warrior and, hence, a man in the *fora* camps, followed by marrying and beginning homesteads of their own. Whether things were ever quite as secure and bountiful as the folk memory suggests may be doubted, but in the middle decades of this century there were two historical episodes which had near catastrophic and far-reaching effects upon traditional Orma pastoralism. It is a discussion of these two events to which we shall now turn.

## Chapter Five

### The Secessionist War and its Aftermath

In chapter four, it was stressed that pastoralism involves a great deal of risk and luck in addition to hard work. Without proper management and care, the herds will die; but despite all the care the owner can manage bad years also come and then the hard-earned wealth of the nomads can be lost in the space of a few months. Traditionally a man who has lost his stock is pitied and mocked, for to be stockless in Orma society meant that one was not a true Orma and hence, in their view, not a man. Nevertheless a man can rebuild his herds (usually through the sheep and goats strategy) and rebound after a while to regain a foothold in the pastoral economy. This "spring-back" ability is, indeed, a common feature in many pastoral nomadic societies ( see Almagor 1978, Cole 1975, Dahl & Hjort 1976, Dyson-Hudson 1980, Gulliver 1955, Monod 1975).

But the decade-long drought of the 1970s and 1980s has been so severe and lasted so long that it has affected nearly everyone in Orma society. This time, the spring mechanism may have been stretched too far, and there is reason to believe that certain irreversible processes have been set in motion.

#### Tension in the North

Some knowledge of the Secessionist, or *Shifita*, War is crucial to understanding the living conditions both in Garissa and indeed generally in northern Kenya today. Many people died, directly or indirectly because of the war. Many more became destitute, some permanently. As a result of the war, new sentiments and alliances emerged; former allies now distrusted each other, while other former enemies developed a new sympathy and understanding for each other.

The Somali-Kenya troubles really began when the Somalia-Ethiopia and Somalia-Kenya boundaries were first drawn by the colonial powers with insufficient respect for existing

ethnic or economic demarcations. As a result of this, these boundaries have been disputed for many years, particularly by the Somalis who lived on both sides of the national borders occupying regions that were generally arid or semi-arid (Crowder & Oliver 1981: 250). It should be noted, however, that it is hardly the fault of the British that the Somali have, since circa 1800, undergone a remarkable surge of demographic expansion.

The local Somali population naturally aspired to manage their own affairs; they knew what ecological limits existed for their livelihood in terms of varieties and quantities of pasture, access to water and to salt-licks. Yet they increasingly found themselves having to answer to competing agencies and governmental departments in Nairobi and Addis Ababa. Interventions by central governments have seldom been advantageous to pastoralists anywhere, and pastoralists naturally tend to regard government agents as one among several unpredictable factors (including rinderpest), that affect normal life in a negative fashion (Hjort 1979: 32).

In February 1960, the former British Somaliland Protectorate unexpectedly gained its independence and in July of the same year it merged with the former Italian colony of Somalia (Fage 1978: 463). Upon Independence, the wave of nationalism in the Somali Republic fostered dreams of a "Greater Somalia" which eventually diffused to certain of the Somali pastoralists and traders in northern Kenya. This stirring in turn gave rise to political insecurity both in the Somali-occupied areas of the Northern Frontier District of Kenya and in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia. The instability of these areas was brought about by a group of people who have come to be called the "*Shifita*" by the Kenyan and Ethiopian governments. "*Shifita*" is an Amharic word meaning "bandit" and was used to describe the Somali tribesmen who periodically raided settled communities and government convoys in the NFD and Ogaden. Both the Nairobi and the Addis Ababa administrations denounced the Somali government for instigating and providing armed support for these raids. This growing tension eventually led to two bitter undeclared wars: the first between Kenya and Somalia in the late 1960s and the second between Ethiopia and Somalia in the mid 1970s.

My emphasis here will be mainly upon the Kenyan-Somali conflict, although the other conflict cannot be entirely ignored as the refugees it produced are one of the main "push factors" stimulating the Somali aggressiveness vis-a-vis northern Kenya..

The *Shifita* disruption was a conflict with many dimensions: superpower strategies and interests with respect to the Red Sea and access to the Suez Canal; the potential significance to Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia of mineral and oil exploitation opportunities in the arid areas; Somalia's wish to control the upper reaches of its rivers; and the difficulties of communication between northern and southern Somalia that, it was believed, could be overcome if Somalia included the Ogaden and the NFD. Thus, the "Secessionist War" has to be seen in the larger context of Somali nationalism, and the Somalis' feeling that the colonial boundaries had been unjustly drawn against the will of the local population.

In addition to these nationalist concerns, the local tensions within the NFD had their roots in regional fears of interference with their traditional pastoral forms of production, in Muslim-Christian rivalry and, to a significant degree, in the insecurity of land rights experienced by the then so-called "alien Somali", that is, ethnic Somali residents of the NFD. These latter were mainly derived from Somali ex-soldiers of the British Army who, following World War II, had established themselves as livestock holders and traders in an area called the Isiolo Leasehold, just outside the district capital of Isiolo. These "alien Somali", who initiated the secessionist campaign, apparently hoped that the upcoming constitutional conference in 1962 would treat the future of the NFD as a separate question. They wanted to be granted a transitional period during which the British would go on administering the area so that they themselves could build up a working administration and could then enter into negotiations with Somalia as an independent entity. They naturally had support for this idea among the pastoral Somali of north-eastern Kenya, and as well they appeared to have gained some support among certain of the Oromo who identified with them on grounds of common life style, religion, myths of common descent, and affinal links with Somali pastoralists.

Less than a year before Kenyan independence in 1963, a referendum was held in the Northern Frontier District by the British colonial government with the intention of finding out whether the inhabitants wanted to become part of Kenya or Somalia (Kenya 1962). In October 1962, a Commission was appointed by the Colonial Secretary "to investigate public opinion in the N.F.D. of Kenya regarding its future" (Kenya 1962); in effect this meant determining popular opinion on the secession question area by area. Its assessment of local opinions was assumed, at the time, to be indisputable and opinion on the question of secession appeared to be related primarily to religious affiliation (Baxter 1963: 233-234). The two member Commission (one Nigerian and one Canadian) found that the "entire" Somali population and a large proportion of the Boran and Orma (especially those living in close contact with the Somali and had adopted Islam) desired to be part of Somalia, while the non-Muslim groups (including some Orma) preferred to remain within Kenya (Kenya 1962: 18). As a result of having undertaken this survey, the Somali and Boran populations received the mistaken impression that the British government had accepted their demands for the NFD to be administered from Mogadishu. However, it soon enough became clear that they were incorrect and that the territory would continue to be administratively a part of Kenya.

Tensions increased in the early months of 1963 when the British government was accused of breaking a promise to consult with the Somali administration before deciding on the future of the NFD. In March of that year, the British Colonial Secretary announced the decision to incorporate the Northern Frontier District as the seventh province of Kenya. To complicate matters further, in the summer of that year Kenya and Ethiopia signed a defence pact. Viewed from a Somali point of view, this agreement between Addis Ababa and Nairobi appeared to be an anti-Somali union. The official Somali attitude was that the new Kenyan Parliament, as well as the Ethiopian government, were "colonial regimes" depriving the Somali population of its ancient right to follow the rains in search of pasture and water (Hjort 1979: 35). An agreement between the incumbent Kenyan and departing

British governments permitting a number of British troops to remain in Kenya after independence was also interpreted in this way. Later, in the autumn of 1963, it became known that Somalia was to receive Soviet military aid and that modern weapons would be available in large quantities for Somali pastoralists, especially the Somali pastoralists who would later become the *Shifita*. Rumors also spread to the effect that the "Bantu regime" of Kenya was going to make Christianity the official religion and force all the inhabitants to convert (Baxter 1986: personal communication). Open conflict broke out, first in the Ogaden and then, in November, one month before Kenya's independence, a full-blown pro-Somali uprising ignited in the NFD. While not so devastating as some of the wars that were raging in Africa at the time, the *Shifita* conflict was to have such an affect that, twenty years later, we find northern Kenya still trying to recover.

#### The *Shifita* War

The Somalis, along with a few Muslim Oromo groups, launched a guerilla war. Most Somali segments in Kenya united in a front despite their more typical state of internal strife and ongoing feuds. Somali attacks were made on police and army posts, which led to the declaration of a state of emergency in the district before the end of the year. The general attitude of the Kenyan government was that all Somalis and most pastoralists were, at least potentially, *shifita*. Indeed, the accusation was openly made in the Kenyan Parliament.

These guerillas operated mainly with old Italian and British weapons which had become superflous in Somalia as a result of the aforementioned Soviet military aid. Their attacks continued through 1964 and they enjoyed considerable success at first. For a long time the guerillas successfully controlled the rural areas during the night hours, and were able to take advantage of their knowledge of the local terrain and of their ability to endure the northern climate. Both the desert and the heat proved difficult for the better-trained and equipped Kenya Police and General Service Unit whose ranks were predominantly recruited from other parts of the country.

By 1965, the guerillas began to have problems securing supplies and provisions and there was a temporary slackening in the intensity of the war. The role of the Somali national government during this period seems to have been limited to supplying hand weapons, a generous contribution of land mines, the acceptance of a few guerilla training camps on Somali soil, extensive propaganda support by way of radio broadcasts from Mogadishu, as well as diplomatic protests when the Somali civilian population had their civil rights abused in connection with the struggle (Hjort 1979: 36). At the end of the year an unsuccessful attempt was made at Arusha in Tanzania to negotiate for a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

More efficient weapons, particularly explosives, began to be introduced into the war by the guerillas in the spring of 1966; and a reintensification of the war at that time led to rigorous restrictions being imposed on the movements of civilians in the NFD. About 80 per cent of the total population of the North found themselves forcibly settled in some fifteen different *dabas* or "strategic villages", enclosed by barbed wire and thorn-bush fences (Matthies 1977: 214). Anyone who ventured further than one mile from the camp were administratively designated as *shifita* and liable to be shot. In the case of Garissa town and others along the Tana, nobody could move out without a permit, and a general curfew was proclaimed from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. Herds were allowed to graze only in particular restricted zones outside the "villages", and only under close military supervision. Many Somali and Orma were not allowed out at all. As a result of the close confinement and resultant overgrazing, the herds were gradually reduced through malnutrition and the contagious diseases which spread rapidly as a result of the congested conditions.

During 1967 the war was stepped up even further as the guerillas introduced the use of land mines on a large scale. All roads in the NFD were mined, causing great losses both in personnel and materiel. For every truck that was blown up the Kenyan troops meted out severe collective punishments on the Somali civilians in the form of large-scale confiscation of cattle, some of which were exported downcountry for slaughter in the Nairobi market or

to the new market-oriented ranches that were being established among the Maasai and some highland Kikuyu. Camels and occasionally even cattle were systematically machine-gunned by the Kenyan Army. By confiscating domestic animals of a majority of the pastoralists, the government reduced the economic bases of the guerillas. In the case of the Orma, much of their remaining small stock was slaughtered by the people themselves in their desperation for food.

At the same time as morale was beginning to break down in the civilian population (as well as among the guerillas), important political changes were taking place in Somalia, particularly the establishment of a new government under the leadership of Prime Minister Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal, a well-known pan-Africanist. Egal turned out to be more open to negotiation than his predecessor and the Arusha talks were resumed, this time with greater success than before. Aid from Somalia for the guerillas slowed down, local resistance waned during 1968 and in March 1969 the last emergency restrictions were lifted from the former NFD.

But independence and war had left lasting effects on the economy and social structure of the area. True, Kenya's political independence had opened up a range of new positions and opportunities for some members of the local community, who were drawn in to fill the administrative and political vacancies in the wake of the colonial withdrawal. But at the same time, the pastoral subsistence economy had been shaken to its foundations by the war, the hard dry seasons of 1966 and early 1967, not to mention torrential rains in 1968 which did little to improve the economic situation. There is an absence of accurate data on what the total herd losses during this period were but many relate stories of "better times" before Kenyan independence.

The Orma and, according to Hjort (1979: 38), the Boran, became convinced that they had been exploited by the Somali. When the war started to go against the secessionists, it was possible for the Somali to take their herds and flocks across the border to Somalia to relatives living there. The Oromo had no such opportunities, and most of the cattle and

camels that were systematically killed or expropriated by the Kenyan troops belonged to Oromo households. Thus, they had in effect served as a buffer between the government troops and the Somali guerillas who made up the core of the secessionists. By this time, both the Orma pastoralists and their stock were in a maximally stressed condition. And It was precisely then that the Sahelian drought of the 1970s began.

### Drought and Famine

The 1970s witnessed the severest drought period in human memory in the semi-arid Sahel zone just south of the Sahara across the whole of, as well as throughout much of the Horn, of Africa. At meeting worldwide media attention, the subsequent international discussion of the problem of desertification may have fostered the impression to the world at large that drought in Africa usually comes in massive doses and hits already arid zones (Matheson 1984: 57). Like floods, however, small-scale droughts of limited duration, causing serious, but localized, losses are far more common than the large events which are more publicized and better studied (Hackett 1984: 20).

The whole of northern Kenya has exceptionally unpredictable climatic patterns. The weather conditions are extreme in one way or another and it is misleading to talk about a "normal pattern" for, in a sense, abnormality is the norm. A rough rule-of-thumb for northern Kenya is that in each ten-year period there will be at least one small, localized drought in some district annually, two to three regional droughts affecting less than ten per cent of the country's population over a two year period, and one major drought affecting ten to fifteen per cent of the population and requiring full-scale mobilization for the redistribution of national grain surpluses and stores - a "national emergency" (Oliver & Crowder 1981: 307).

The Sahelian drought proved especially harsh in the Horn during 1970-71. In Kenya, the drought dealt a fatal blow to individual pastoralists and thousands are said to have starved to death in this one year alone. Massive relief operations were launched by the

Kenyan government and various international and Christian aid organizations. To illustrate the severity of the conditions: for a period of time in 1971 over 140,000 people in northern Kenya (predominantly in the Turkana, Pakot and Karamojong regions of the north-west) were reported to be subsisting on famine relief (Matthies 1977: 259).

The Oromo survivors of that period refer to it as *Gaaf' Daab'* or, "The Time of Stop" (Baxter 1986: personal communication). A period, that is, when proper life ceased and people had to survive like "wild animals in the bush", and not "live as proper human beings should". By 1972 the cattle resources of the district had been severely depleted, and the flocks of sheep and goats and the herds of camels went more or less extinct. It was pointed out earlier that most small stock was consumed as food but the situation with respect to camels, an animal better adapted to drought conditions, was different. Because of their mobility and resistance to drought, camels were more attractive to the Somali guerillas than cattle. Some Orma camels had been stolen by the guerillas, others shot by the Kenyan army to prevent valuable transport and milk animals from falling into the hands of the enemy, and still more died as a result of diseases acquired from the congested conditions in the *dabas*. The slow regeneration rate of camel herds (see Dahl & Hjort 1976: 88) and, in particular, the scarcity and cost of breeding dams have made recovery exceedingly slow.

### Picking up the Pieces

Even today recovery is still far from complete in the northern regions of Kenya, in as much as adverse climatic and environmental conditions have prevailed since the *Shifita* problems and *Gaaf' Daab'*. In 1975-76 there was another severe drought and new relief hand-outs had to be mounted. In 1978 massive flooding following unseasonable rains killed many of the regenerating herds. Another localized drought in the north-east in 1982 likewise called for relief aid. And finally the terrible drought of 1984-85 that afflicted Ethiopia and which received worldwide media coverage severely afflicted northern Kenya as well. The drought still endures. Upon my arrival in the district, I found many animals

had recently died because of lack of pasture and parched watering points. Many people were underfed and malnourished and had flocked to the towns along the Tana for food aid. When the rains came in April, hope and optimism were renewed. However, the rains did not stop and the level of the Tana began to rise as did seasonal rivers whose usually dry beds overflowed. Within two weeks of the start of the rains the majority of the Tana River District had been flooded and most lines of communication were cut. It was only with the greatest difficulty that food and supplies were able to be flown in; and once there, distribution posed even greater problems.

### Post-Shifta Economy

Ironically, it was during the mid-1960s, that disastrous period for the livestock economy of northern Kenya, that the economic potential of the arid areas for the first time came to be officially recognized in Kenya and to be seen as important for national development (Republic of Kenya, Development Plan 1966-70: 134). The policy makers became aware that excessive regional discrepancies in the degree of economic development would slow down the nation's political integration, and as a partial remedy for this, it was argued that the pastoral areas of the North should be increasingly involved in the modern beef industry through the transfer of immature cattle from the poorer areas to feeding lots for fattening (Kaufmann 1976: 275).

A new government agency was set up to attempt to rationalize the marketing of cattle. Marketing was completely removed from the Department of Veterinary Services in order to free it from that agency's traditional preoccupation with disease control. Under the name of the Livestock Marketing Division (LMD), and working within the Ministry of Agriculture, this new agency was authorized to establish and maintain stock routes and holding grounds and was issued a motorized unit to overcome local obstacles of water shortage or disease along the routes. LMD buys supplies for the Kenya Meat Commission (KMC) which has a

monopoly over meat distribution and butchery licencing in urban areas. It is also the KMC which now operates the meat processing facility at Athi River.

The LMD, together with the County Councils, that is, the local governing bodies, also runs auctions where rural butchers, individual traders and ranchers purchase stock. As indicated above the droughts of the 1970s and early 1980s had forced many poor Orma to offer oxen and even dry cows for sale at very low prices in order to meet their immediate needs for food and this had enabled those who had some drought-secure capital to hoard trading stock at relatively low prices during those years, and the origin of the modern Orma town elite can probably be traced to the disparity created by these droughts. The greatest profits appear to have been made by traders where certain families were known to have been leading residents of the flood plain grazing communities, and therefore enjoyed a kind of informal privileged access to these areas in the dry season. These traders continue to have a dominant position both as cattle traders and as leaders in local politics.

Quite apart from these wealthy Orma herdowners-cum-traders, the succession of natural and man-made disasters has fundamentally altered the relations between Orma pastoralists and the cash economy. Whereas before, few were dependent on the marketing of milk for their survival, it has now become necessary for the majority to maximize the food output from their herds by converting livestock or livestock produce into grain (that is, they sell livestock for cash with which to purchase grain), and to supplement herd incomes with wage labour or farming. Owing to the stock losses, the herdspeople today find themselves more dependent than ever before on the few animals that they are able sell.

Since the 1975-76 drought, the cattle marketing facilities appear to be somewhat improved, although, at the same time, the Orma maintain that there is a scarcity of marketable stock. The LMD has changed its policy, so that auctions are much more frequent and even small numbers of cattle are purchased directly from the herdowners. Private traders from areas further south have also been encouraged and given more opportunity to buy. They buy at a unit price per category of stock, rather than over the

weightbridge, thus following a practice usually preferred by the Orma. The marketing facilities for both the small-scale traders and for the herdowners themselves have thereby greatly improved, while the scope for the larger local middlemen has been correspondingly narrowed. There is, at least potentially, a new niche for the Orma small-scale traders, who operate on a much smaller scale than the traditional Somali cattle-merchant, who can make a living going round to collect small herds of four to eight cattle and driving them themselves to weekly auctions. Butchers and private traders from the Meru, Kamba, Coastal and Kikuyu areas have been offering high prices at these auctions for sheep, goats and cattle.

However, as the scope of Africanized commercial ranches expands, new lines of conflict between the government and the herders may well develop over marketing and disease control. Even today, veterinary regulations hamper the trade, and they are still sufficiently bothersome to give rise to a substantial illegal movement of cattle, bypassing the normal stock routes and checkpoints.

#### Change Along the Tana

It is obvious that whatever Orma may wish, their modes of life and livelihood have been radically and inexorably altered since Kenyan independence so much so, in fact, that the option of returning to the old pastoral economy is simply no longer there. Though some young Orma may envy the wealth and power of the predominantly Bantu-speaking bureaucrats, policemen and agency personnel who today administer the NFD, few attempt to emulate their way of life. Some have been driven to give up pastoral life, but, hardly any have been lured away from it entirely as a result of more leisurely or rewarding opportunities having been offered elsewhere. Significantly, the comparative few who have opted for steady jobs, and the very, very few who have steady and well-paid jobs, save hard to buy stock which their brothers herd for them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Keenan (1977: chapters 6 & 11) reports that many Tuareg of the Ahaggar have been attracted by the rewards offered by boom

Thus, one way or another, it seems as if the future of the peoples of the former NFD is bound up with the cattle (milk and meat) industry. But the nature of this new rationalized and modernized enterprise is so different from the traditional mode of livelihood of the Orma that it should by no means be taken for granted that the Orma, as a people, will fit into this new economic system with their identity and institutions intact.

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petroleum conditions to give up stock rearing. Cole (1975: chapter 7), on the other hand, reports that the Al Murrah Bedouin strive to keep up a pastoral life, either by proxy through kin or part-time, because they like it and also, prudently, because they continue to see stock as an enduring asset whereas oil-based jobs, however remunerative they may be, are only temporary

## Chapter Six

### Contemporary Orma Society

In the years that followed the *Shifta* War, most Orma pastoralists only had small herds left, which meant that a more efficient use be made of their products. There was a shift away from a pattern of subsistence based on their livestock to one with a greater reliance on agricultural products. Orma pastoralists became directly dependent upon marketing their livestock's produce with the result that, rather than feeding the family, milk and meat was sold for cash that was, accordingly, used primarily to purchase grain, sugar, tea and tobacco.

#### Integration within Kenya

As previously noted, the initial rationale for incorporation of the Tana River District into colonial Kenya came about thanks to the idea that the northern regions would be able to provide valuable breeding stock for the ranching economies of the White Highlands. In addition to their function as a provider of breeding material, cattle were also envisioned to be exported downcountry to fulfil the demand for a supply of cheap meat to feed the growing rural population. These changes were largely implemented. Today, even though the Northern Frontier District no longer exists by that name, the whole area, including the Tana River District, continues in its capacity as a provider of immature cattle for the commercial ranches and a source of inexpensive beef for consumption in the Highlands (Kaufmann 1975: 275). Thus, despite the very real social changes which have taken place its role in the Kenyan national economy thus appears to have changed very little from that which the early colonial authorities envisioned for it.

The same holds true for the export of another utility, labour. The process of pastoral impoverishment on the one hand, and the spread of farming and ranching capitalism to the African areas that initially served as labour reserves, on the other, have expanded the

recruiting area for agricultural labourers and herdsmen to include the Orma as well. Many writers discussing change in lesser developed countries have noted that, in the wider context, subsistence economies like that of the Orma or of peasant farmers tend to support the capitalist sector with which they are connected, by paying for the reproduction of labour employed in industries and on commercial farms (Ensminger 1984: 138-149). By bearing and raising young men who can be used by the capitalist system as labourers, and by supporting their rural families who raise new labourers, the subsistence economy makes it possible for the buyers of labour to pay only "bachelor wages".

Though the processes of labour migration and meat and livestock exports are the most obvious mechanisms of encapsulation, there are other ways in which colonialism, an expanding capitalist economy and national integration have affected the fundamental conditions of the Orma pastoral lifestyle. One is through the limitation of land. The Orma on the whole didn't really suffer from the *Pax Britannica* and the institution of tribal boundaries, as they were given a relatively well-watered area coveted by other pastoral groups. They did however lose access to the important wells at Wajir which they formerly used but it was more often their Somali neighbors who desired access to Orma pastures than they themselves asked for concessions to the Wajir area.

The "tribal boundaries" policy of the colonial government was a visible element of change, but the growth of monetarized farming systems which was triggered during the colonial period, affected the Orma adversely and in subtle ways which were not always understood by the average herdowner. A rapidly expanding settled population resulted in farmers utilizing a greater area of land that, at one time, had been deemed unsuitable for profitable dry land (or rain-fed) agriculture. Such areas, as, for example the northwestern border and the banks of the seasonal rivers of Ormland, were traditionally in the sphere of pastoral migration routes and *fora* cattle and camel camps. However, increasingly poor and landless Kamba and Pokomo farmers began turning to these marginal areas in search

of a livelihood, and as a consequence the area available to pastoral drought-grazing has been reduced.

For the Orma, restrictions on drought-grazing lands, in whatever way they may be used, led to an increased vulnerability. The drastic herd reductions suffered during the *Shifita* War produced an outmigration of significant categories of people, whose labour was essential for an ecologically viable land use pattern. When large numbers of young men turned southwards to look for work, the herds normally under their care had to be grazed closer to the homesteads and, as a result, vast areas of grazing went unused. A scarcity of transport animals and the increasing necessity for impoverished families to attempt to combine pastoralism with irrigated farming only aggravated the problem. The range of cattle mobility in Orma pastoralism thus underwent an overall decrease overall which in turn led to overgrazing of indispensable areas with annual forage within easy access to permanent water supplies. Many of the vacated areas, renowned for their comparatively good pastures, were soon claimed by Somali stockholders.

It is very likely that the related losses of land, labour and livestock greatly increased the vulnerability of the Orma to the post-*Shifita* droughts than they would have been had they been able to practice their traditional livestock management patterns. The pastoral economy has become vulnerable, and the colonial and post-independence changes in the conditions of the Orma lifestyle has resulted in a situation whereby newly impoverished herd owners have increasingly less of a chance of survival through traditional subsistence means. Conversely some of the niches opened up by these different economic pursuits have provided the wealthy with better opportunities of returning to livestock keeping when the droughts are over.

#### Pastoral "Inequality"

In the early days of the Tana community, when most Orma were pastoralists, their society would have appeared more or less homogenous, at least from the point of view of

lifestyle and of access to food and other similar necessities. The most visible and permanent status differences pertained to the gap between the Orma herders and the settled Pokomo (and Kamba) agriculturalists in addition to the hunting-and-gathering Waata minority. This inequality was justified by the pastoralists on the grounds of the inability of the latter two peoples to manage livestock "properly" (Townsend 1978: 289, 294, 1980: 103). Of course, the other status differences corresponded to the relations between men and women and between the ages. As I noted in Chapter Four, women were highly dependent on whatever links they as mothers could maintain with men (sons, brothers or husbands) who were in control of capital (that is, the herds). However, among the male herdowners, or between the pastoral households (seen as units), there appears to have been a rough "structural equality". Even though there were men with more or less access to authority and influence, and men with more or less livestock capital and labour under their control, such discrepancies were partly disguised by an ideology of egalitarianism which called for equal access to consumption items, if not necessarily capital. All households of the pastoral community, both wealthy and poor, led an economic life subject to high risks. Indeed, as has been indicated, wealth accumulation in one generation could be quickly eradicated in the next. Even so, some men were able to undertake more efficient management practices by acquiring a variety of livestock, distributing these herds and flocks throughout a wide area and by mobilizing more debts of reciprocity such that in the case of a loss of livestock they would be able to retain the nucleus of a herd and maintain themselves in the pastoral economy. They became, in effect, wealthy herders. Yet, in Orma cultural terms these individuals were regarded as either very fortunate or, quite simply, exceptional herders (*ilato*) and were regarded with more of a sense of respect and admiration than anything else.

Changes in the political and economic structure, especially through the growth of the colonial and independent Kenyan administrations, the expansion of a capitalist economy, the *Shifita* War and droughts have created a situation whereby there is an increased visible

inequality between people who would traditionally have been structural "equals".

Economic gaps are easily observable in the division of the Tana River Orma community into the following categories:

1. Orma families who have no animals whatsoever and no resources other than their labour. The best estimate for the population percentage of this section of Orma would be 40%.
2. Semi-sedentarized poor pastoralists and irrigation farmers who produce partly for their own subsistence, partly for the market, and who are also involved in labour migration. The percentage following this mode of livelihood would be approximately 55%.
3. The "pastoral bourgeoisie" or elite who combine traditional economic ventures with political and administrative office, intellectual leadership in the fields of modern public education, Muslim instruction, local development, and who will make occasional attempts in business and trade. This group is in the minority of the Orma population with perhaps some 5% of the people.

There are substantial differences in the life chances of adults and their children depending upon which category they find themselves in. Life chance is defined here as the probable access to material resources, including food, clothing and shelter, during an individual's lifetime. For children born into Category One, as an example, there is really not much of a decision and their life chances will be significantly lower than those children born into Category Three. Obviously, there are variations in lifestyle corresponding to the categories as well. The main way in which a family earns its living determines both its domestic organization and its material equipment and sets limits to the opportunities it has of realizing high-prestige values such as "traditional" generosity, modernity, and now, Muslim merit. So far, these three social strata do not exist independently as autonomous cultural systems, but are more or less solely the result of economic differences.

Members of the three strata also differ systematically in their opportunities to influence the income chances of others, and thus in their economic power over each other. This

power derives from differences in their access both to the primary means of production and to political control over the employment opportunities generated inside Ormland.

### The Northern Desert Town

Nowhere are the incipient tendencies towards social stratification more apparent than in the physical structure of the small district towns. The layout of these towns clearly reflects the divisions between those who "have" and those who "have not". The nucleus of a typical Tana town is composed of straight streets lined with square iron-roofed mud houses and *dukas* sited on rectangular plots. Flanking this core is another distinct settlement area, the *manyatta*. A *manyatta* is an aggregation of mat houses of the traditional dome shape, covered with a variety of materials ranging from proper house mats to rags, strips of plastic and pieces of cardboard. Garissa, a district headquarters, deviates from this model only in scale and degree of modernity. Nevertheless, there remains a distinction between those who reside in the tiny brick homes and those who simply exist in the desolate area of decaying huts.

### A Pastoral Gathering Place

The town is not distinct from contemporary Orma pastoral society but an integral part of it. Over time, urban centers such as Garissa, Bura, Hola and Garsen have become a focal point for the community life of the Orma. Any Orma elder who wishes to be well-informed and take an active part in the decision-making of present issues in addition to the moulding of the Orma future frequently visits the town. Towns are where one goes to associate with other elders, where business is transacted, and where vital information on national affairs, not to mention pasture conditions in other parts of the district, is available. It is also the foremost place where one can publicly display that one is a person of standing, a progressive, "development-oriented citizen, and a "good Muslim" by making regular visits to the mosque.

When area public meetings (*baraza*) are organized to bring together the pastoralists and representatives of the central or provincial administration, they usually take place in Garissa, Hola or Garsen. The elected representatives of the Orma dwell in these towns, rather than in the cattle camps, even if they themselves are wealthy herdowners. Meetings of the agricultural, school and development committees also take place in the permanent centres. It is only the meetings of a specific pastoral nature involving the grazing communities (*deda*) and lineage councils that are held in the homesteads of aspiring elders.

When these individuals come into town periodically or whether they live there on a semi-permanent basis, it is in the mud-brick house area where their dwellings are located. It is in this part of the town that one will find the accommodations of the traders, the county councillors, the teachers, the civil servants, the *hajjis* and (of particular significance for the present work) the wealthy stockowners. If a herdsman is able to obtain a licence for a plot of land in the town and can afford to build a house, he often gives building a mud-brick house a high priority, even if he does not aspire to a career in trade or politics. The benefits and advantages of frequenting the town have been discussed. A town dwelling is also a multi-purpose asset. To give a commonly occurring example, for a herder who makes frequent visits into town, it becomes awkward to have to rely on the hospitality of others, and it can be difficult to raise cash at short notice in order to pay for accommodation at a guest house.<sup>1</sup> Having a house in town solves this problem and, in turn, enables its owner to assume a role of hospitality at low cost. The town house also provides the pastoral family with a refuge during drought periods, when milk becomes scarce in the camps forcing a reliance on maize sold in the *dukas*. It is also an abode to retire to in old age, when the herd owner begins to grow weary of the hardships of camp life. Children who attend the town school have a home, and when family life within the polygynous

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<sup>1</sup>There is only one bank in the whole of Northeast Province. It is located in Garissa and has varied hours of operation.

household or the extended family becomes difficult, problems can be solved by separating and placing some members in the town house.

A typical town dwelling has two rooms. The interior furnishings are influenced by Arab/Somali/Swahili domestic styles and contain many items of furnishings not usually found in the cattle camps. These goods are predominantly used for decoration. There is not an abundance of household utilities, but some of the things that are peculiar to the wealthy Orma are articles for which there is little practical demand so that they are not begged away. It is immediately obvious that life in the cattle camps does not favour an accumulation of belongings which are merely decorative or symbols of status. Rather, the necessity for mobility mandates light-weight household equipment. The constant dismantling and setting up of camps exert considerable wear and tear on the utensils and goods that Orma households possess. In pastoral life, small personal ornaments, leather wall tablets and production assets like cattle and milk-pots represent accumulation, personal success and one's "stage" in life. Goods that are considered "modern" and which are associated with town culture, on the other hand, are often unsuited for use in the pastoral areas. The town house, therefore, becomes the focus for whatever conspicuous consumption there is. However, the level of such consumption appears to be quite low among the Orma, who seem to find it unnatural to actively display a distinctly higher material accumulation than needy kinsmen. Besides, the only real purpose for surpluses such as clothing and utensils in Orma ethno-economics is to give them away (see Baxter 1966: 125).

Though town households are often closely linked to camp households, women's daily lives tend to be more markedly either "pastoral" or "urban" since they continue to play a role subordinate to that of their husbands and they tend to commute less often than the men between town and camp. There is also a clear difference in the marital roles of town wives and camp wives. Among the wives of the wealthy townsmen two separate patterns can be discerned. On the one hand, there are few Orma girls who have been educated in the public

school system, and it appears that the upbringing and education of daughters is becoming an increasingly important part of elite class consolidation. A wife who has a primary school education is considered to be an asset for a trader since she is quite able to help out or undertake the economics of running a business, and a secondary school graduate can take a job as a teacher or medical assistant, and thus contribute to the total economic resources of the family. Such women usually count on being able to continue their occupational careers rather than becoming housewives, and this poses few problems, given the easy access to cheap domestic servants that wealthy members of urban Orma society have. The wealthy Orma town families have thus been pioneers in the education of their daughters yet most Orma girls continue to be educationally handicapped.

The formally uneducated town wives of the wealthy Orma lead lives which are in many ways more restricted than that of the camp wives. Much of their time is occupied nursing children and preparing food (*anjera*, *posho* and maize meal). Though women in traditional Orma households were regarded as peripheral to livestock management, they performed certain tasks that were of extreme importance to the pastoral economy. As we have seen, these duties were particularly those connected with the building and dismantling of huts, the milking of livestock, and with the care of weak and young animals. A man depended upon having a wife who was skilled and hardworking in these respects. In addition, the wife signified important links of cooperation with other herdowners outside his agnatic group. In a general sense, however, men who reside in town are less dependent on their wives than are those husbands in the cattle camps. Male Muslim ideals of wifely seclusion become much more apparent in the context of the urban environment, where they appear to be more practically feasible than in the cattle camps.

### Manyatta Life

Prior to the 20th century the inhabitants of the *manyattas* or "shantytowns" were sedentary artisans such as carpenters and ironworkers who preferred to cluster around the

town rather than to lead a mobile life between the pastoral camps. When the *daba* confinement was ended after the *Shifita* War, the *manyatta* residents were joined by pastoralists who were no longer able to return to their former occupation. Many were whole families who had lost their cattle, while others were members of shattered households: widows, divorcees and deserted women and children (Badaway 1988: personal communication). There were also several Waata who, before the Emergency, would have lived as hunters-and-gatherers and clients of Orma stockholders, but whose traditional lifestyle had become all but extinct due, in large measure, to both the poverty of the pastoralists and to new restrictive game laws instituted by the Administration in Nairobi.

While all Orma who live predominantly from pastoralism experience periods of plenty as well as seasons of near starvation, many of the permanent inhabitants of the *manyattas* lead a life of continuous and unrelieved hardship, where the fruits of one day's labour usually have to be consumed immediately and where one or two days' illness means that a family will go hungry. Many of the sources of income available to them are both limited in quantity and of short duration, so that eking out an existence on the margins of the national economy requires both ingenuity and awareness of opportunity. Some methods of making a living such as charcoal-burning and trading in *miraa*, are liable to be legally prohibited at intervals, or continuously forbidden, such as *chang'aa* -brewing or poaching. Other sources of subsistence tend to be unpredictable, like begging, famine relief and mission charity. Berry pickers, firewood collectors and carpenters depend on an insecure market. Normally the livelihood strategies of making a living are such as need little capital and depend on one's own personal labour only. However, those who are confined to this way of life are usually not the strong and healthy young but those who have never been considered "useful" to employers of wage labour or able to get hold of and maintain a *shamba* plot. They are both marginal within the traditional Orma social structure and marginalized in an economic sense.

Within these impoverished households men and women tend to specialize in different areas and control their own earnings from those activities although they may pool them in order to purchase food and other basic necessities for the family. The wives in such families frequently maintain a strong position vis-a-vis their husbands by virtue of their earning capacity. Polygynous households are relatively rarer in the *manyattas*, and this gives the wife an initially stronger position. The wages of migrant night-watchmen, herdsmen or agricultural labourers are such that even their immediate nuclear households frequently need to supplement their household budgets with some subsistence-oriented activities. There is a need for a flow of resources into the family to supplement their subsistent activities, rather than an opportunity to support others by it. Poverty can undermine an Orma man's ability to fulfill his marital role, as defined by both traditional Orma culture and, now, Islam. Since many young women continue to have little say in the initial choice of a husband, they often judge a marriage in terms of the subsistence security it can offer. A man's failure to adequately support his wife can create tension and even marital breakdown. This is interesting, for divorce was so uncommon as to be virtually non-existent in the traditional Orma lifestyle. Indeed, there is no Oromo word for the dissolution of a marriage (see Legesse 1973: 18). The children of these unions and others who populate this area are frequently employed as poorly paid house-servants in the town proper. They also spend a great deal of time spent loitering near the bars and government offices hoping for handouts from passers-by.

The younger women living in the *manyattas* can occasionally earn a living by trading *miraa*. Others manage to survive on the support they receive from more or less temporary relationships with men who either live in the towns or are just passing through. These relations range from "tea and sympathy" to concubinage or even formalized, but usually short-lived, marriages with a merchant, police officer, soldier or civil servant resident in the town. Rarely do these men remain and try to establish themselves. A posting in the North is neither a desirable nor enviable position and most consider it to be a form of

punishment. Women become attached to these individuals but seldom end up with anything to show for the union other than a child or two.

Many of the permanent inhabitants of the *manyattas* are elderly women. Because of their peripheral status in relation to stock rights, women, especially those who are old, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of pastoral impoverishment. The traditional forms of social insurance built into Orma kin norms that had the effect of protecting women after the end of their child-bearing years no longer function to assist all those in desperate need of protection today. Still less can they cover the needs of those who have been devastated by the *Shifita* War and subsequent droughts. The elderly women with the greatest chance of survival in the contemporary Tana environment remain those with brothers and sons who are independent herdowners, or who have daughters married to such men. Childless women, and the sisters, daughters, and mothers of stockless men tend to gravitate to these peri-urban settlements.

The opportunities that offer themselves to people who have been forced out of pastoralism do not directly favor women, least of all those who are old. There is very little demand for them on the regular wage labour market, and only through their own physical strength and assistance from their children is it possible for them to maintain an irrigated *shamba* in the schemes in such a state that they will not lose title to it. Nor are the incomes from wage-labour or *shamba* production generally so large that even those who are younger and stronger can afford to support any significant number of marginally productive dependents.

Left without support from relatives, many of the old *manyatta* women subsist on money earned from the selling of various forest products (firewood, aromatic roots and woods, acacia pods used for goat fodder, wild berries and so on) which they may be able to gather. Most supplement this with begging. Some attach themselves to the various Christian missions in the area wherein they act as "boarding mothers" to a number of

school children who originate from families who live in the pastoral camps or otherwise at a distance from the school.

In the traditional system it was only the women who could construct and own the huts. However, several elderly women have even lost this last resource due to lack of time for hut maintenance, accidental fires in the dry (and very windy) season, etc. Serious losses of hut equipment were sustained during the *Shifta* Emergency, and the total supply of house mats in the area has never really recovered. The large amount of work invested in a hut makes it difficult for a poor elderly woman to rebuild her dwelling once she has lost it. There are several women in the Tana towns who do not live on their own but board with sisters or female friends. Most have bartered their milk pots, fat containers and even personal adornments, to hawkers of tourist souvenirs in order to purchase food. From our discussion in Chapter Four on it can easily be seen that Orma women regard the loss of mat-houses (huts) and domestic equipment as a loss of dignity and the ultimate sign of destitution, for they are important symbols of married and adult status.

The core of the population who permanently reside in the *manyatta* find themselves, then, more or less dislodged from the pastoral life. In the dry season, especially during those times of prolonged drought, the number of inhabitants of the settlement is increased. Those migrating in are impoverished pastoral households wanting to take advantage of town based handouts of famine relief, and by individuals who find it difficult to remain as dependents in pastoral households when milk is scarce. When the rains return, those who are able gradually drift off again in search of pasture. Yet, with the increasing severity of climatic conditions contributing to the loss of more and more livestock the number returning to the pastures is reduced every year and the population density of the *manyatta* continues to increase.

### Alternatives to Pastoralism

What are the alternatives open to those whom the disasters have left without stock? For an unskilled labourer there are relatively few opportunities for obtaining steady employment within the district. The major employers in the rural areas remain the government and various international aid agencies. There is also seasonal employment as road workers, pit diggers and builders. More irregular and temporary local employment is offered as *duka* assistants and casual *hoteli* help, and as house servants and agricultural labourers with private employers. In addition, there are herding jobs at the Livestock Marketing Department, employment as cleaners, sweepers and messengers to various government departments, and a few industrial jobs such as maize meal milling, working at the local ginners, and preparing skins for outside markets.

Given the limited access to employment within the district a large number of Orma men have turned to other parts of Kenya and to Somalia in search of work. It is difficult to ascertain how large the exact proportion of Orma labour emigrants out of the Tana River District is. Nevertheless, it does appear that, today, a quite small percentage of adult sons is occupied with nomadism and the pastoral economy. According to their relatives and friends, most young Orma males are engaged in other occupations throughout the district and outside on the coast or down country.

The first job that an uneducated Orma man will seek is usually still that of a policeman or soldier. The training and experience a police or army recruit gains are useful and both jobs are exceptionally well-paid in comparison to what a casual labourer will earn. Organized recruitment campaigns in Garissa, Bura and Garsen have enlisted men for both the armed forces and police services, and to the next alternative, as a grounds-keeper or night-watchman with a private company down country. The occupation of night-watchman is a contemporary Oromo niche, not as well paid as that of a policeman or soldier, but still a "manly" job in Oromo eyes (Baxter 1986: personal communication). Indeed, it has almost

become a "marker" occupation for pastoralists in urban Kenya (see Spencer 1973: 163-164).

Less highly appreciated employment is that of a herdsman or farmhand for wealthy Orma and Pokomo households. With respect to herding, the overgrazing which develops around the market towns necessitates that large numbers of stock be sent out to remote cattle camps. Since the herd might not necessarily be needed for subsistence, these modern-day *fora* camps can remain away from their owners homesteads for months at a time. The job demands a great deal of stamina, experience as well as responsibility, but does not provide much of a salary. Similar employment is occasionally available in the large livestock ranches of the former White Highlands and in the area around Voi. As a supplement to the herding activities of the Orma in the south there is some seasonal work also available for coffee-pickers and garden hands.

In the early studies of African labour migration, authors like Watson (1958) and Van Velsen (1961) saw the phenomenon as a support for tribal cohesion and continuity. Rural economies, where male labour had been under-utilized or largely dispensed with, prospered from the export of excess labour. Absentees, however, continued to play an important role in their home communities, sending back cash and cultivating links with the homestead in a way that simulated traditional values. A similar situation is perhaps true with respect to the police and army recruits among the Orma. With their monthly wages they are often able to send back money to their pastoral kin and later to retire from the service with some savings and a once-for-all pension payment that can be converted into a town house, a *duka*, or a flock of small stock or a few cattle.

However, the recent wave of migrants in search for work may not play the same role. Such migration is seen more as a solution to the immediate pressure on food in the district than as a means of channeling back extra resources to the Tana. Even the young men who spend some years down country or on the coast before marrying are rarely able to do more than barely support themselves on their earnings while any livestock they may have

hopefully increases in numbers at home under the care of senior relatives. Completely stockless families are likely to drift off permanently to life within the "rural proletariat", living in the slums of Nairobi and Mombasa. For these people, there is little to tie them to the Tana River District.

### The Irrigation Schemes

Another major alternative for stockless and impoverished Orma has been offered by the irrigation projects along the Tana River and its tributaries. The technologically most advanced scheme is the Bura Irrigation Project on the Galole River. This project is organized by the Ministry of Agriculture in cooperation with the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and substantially funded by the Danish government. It is a closely directed and supervised scheme, in which central planning is important in the choice of crops and in the organization of marketing and distribution. Cooperative labour is systematically used to clear fresh fields and construct new irrigated ditches. Payment is in foodstuffs. Perhaps because of its high profile this scheme had better access to tractors, handmills and other mechanical aids than most Kenyan schemes, which usually rely on human labour. Many of the smaller irrigation projects have suffered serious setbacks and continuing difficulties associated with salination, flooding or the silting of canals. The minor schemes provide a varying scale of external involvement and local communal cooperation. The central government or aid agency has, in some cases, assisted with the initial clearing of the land by tractor, and the Ministry of Agriculture supplies technical advice in the form of agricultural instructors. There is typically an "agricultural committee" which plays a directive role in the planning and allocation of water rotations, the allocation of land plots, and in the organization of cooperative communal labour to maintain canals. On the whole, however, the tenants are left to themselves to see to it that they reap a harvest, and that they maintain their fields well enough so as not to forfeit their land rights.

Only families who have settled in the schemes as complete households have been able to remain. According to the Bura Agricultural Committee, the plot sizes in the average Kenyan localized irrigation schemes are larger (from three to five acres) than those plots allocated on the larger internationally financed schemes that are directed from Nairobi (which range in size from one-half to two acres). The latter have recruited families favoring the poorest and, as a result, many single women now farm. In practice however, farming is a viable alternative only for the relatively young and strong, and for families with more than one adult member. The limitation of plot size to 1/2 to 2 acres in the internationally aided schemes makes it unrealistic to expect that they can provide the basis for a return back into the pastoral economy for families which do not initially have at least some supplementary holdings of livestock.

#### A "New" Pastoralism

Farming and wage employment do not, in and of themselves, lead to a severing of relations with the pastoral community. Nor is it only the totally stockless who have turned to the various alternative means of subsistence. One consequence of the devastating stock losses which the Orma have suffered has been a tendency to reallocate the responsibility for pastoral herd management (and the use of livestock products) to a limited number of herd owners: either to those who have herds which are large enough or to those who are in a senior position in the kinship system (usually the elder brother). In this situation, more people may actually have ownership rights in livestock than would be evident from a simple count in the pastures. For example, in a situation in which a family might be comprised of a group of brothers, the livestock management will tend to be reserved for the eldest, while younger brothers are "squeezed out" of the pastoral niche and have to find employment elsewhere. Nevertheless, they may still retain some degree of rights in the animals, particularly if they remit cash earnings from wage employment to keep the family in food, clothes and tea.

Too much preoccupation with the question of seniority of status however, may cloud the extent to which the alternative activities assumed by younger brothers remains a matter of direct concern for the fraternal group as a whole, especially if they remain in the same general area. Even though there is a specialization and prestige attached to the role of the elder brother vis-a-vis his junior siblings, there is acknowledgement made as to the importance of other, non-pastoral, sources of income that the younger brothers bring in through their efforts. The group can then, as a unit, combine all the respective "careers" of its members, each one having its own risks and advantages, and contributing to the maintenance of the household and its collective livestock holdings. According to my sources this viability is usually brought about by the purchase of new breeding herds or of land. Post-*Shifita* life on the Tana demands a new type of diversification, making use of new sources of income. Traditional values remain but they tend to be realized through contemporary means.

The strategy of keeping brothers together in one unit with multi-focused economic pursuits, however, carries the seeds of dissolution of the fraternal group. The breaking of the fraternal unit is not necessarily a disruptive force and often occurred in traditional Orma society as younger brothers would build up their herds and then start their own homesteads. In the contemporary Tana environment, brothers, as a joint unit, usually try to engage in all available types of money-earning activities, but each individual also strives to establish the same kind of diversification for his own family. Thus, for example, the brother engaged in the *duka* trade does not content himself with that but, when the opportunity arises, also invests in sheep and goats, and sends a son or two to learn English and/or Swahili (a formal education being recognized as the best path to upward economic mobility). If the ideal outcome occurs, and all the brothers are able to assume the responsibility for livestock in which they maintain rights, the fraternal unit will then dissolve and new contractual ties will be forged by each brother with non kin. However,

should all of the herd be lost, as has happened in many instances, the kin links are also severed.

Father-son units frequently exhibit the same attempt at economic diversification. Many Orma fathers try and substitute the work of clients or sons-in-law for the labour input of their natural sons such that the latter may secure wage employment. Nevertheless, compared to nearly every other occupation available, pastoralism alone holds out the promise of capital growth which is not even limited by the salary obtained by an Orma migrant, and this gives the stock-owning senior a bargaining advantage.

For the pastoral household there are great advantages in having additional, non-pastoral sources of cash, particularly if they can be used as a "springboard" for recovery after drought or to save livestock from enforced slaughter in the face of famine. Neither contracts for jobs nor *shambas* are reliable income generators in northern Kenya, but, in combination with pastoralism, they may effectively balance some of the disadvantages of the one with the advantages of the other.

A question to be asked is whether this new form of multi-focused economy is the result of a conscious strategy or rather the accidental outcome of scarcity of resources which compels people to seize any opportunity they find. I would contend that this diversification appears to be a matter of strategy, and that, indeed, it is really a logical extension of the traditional pastoral notions of "dispense and diversify" emanating from a way of life that has a great deal of risk attached to it (see, for example, Almagor 1978a: 65-72, Goldschmidt 1979: 16-24, Lewis 1961: 58-60). People who have suffered such dramatic losses as did the Oromo in the cattle massacres of the Somali *Shifto* War can no longer afford to remain wholly within the pastoral economy. A formal education and a fairly productive *shamba* become very important as strategies for they cannot be dispensed with in the same fashion as were their flocks and herds.

### Wealthy Orma

Successful diversification requires a certain amount of initial capital in addition to a sufficient access to, and control of, labour. Most Orma, whether they are wealthy or destitute, have in the past responded to and continue to respond to, economic risks by diversifying their activities. The "strategy", I would contend, is the same for both rich and poor Orma and derives, as I have suggested, from traditional values. The difference however is that the wealthier households are in a privileged position which enables them to establish control over resources which are not only economically profitable in and of themselves, but also act as keys to open new and more technologically "modern" fields of opportunity.

### "Elite" Pastoralism

The core asset in the array of resources controlled by "elite" Orma remain their herds. Wealthy families continue to operate within the traditional, livestock-oriented networks of social relations and the predominantly domestic system of production. They can enjoy the advantages that wealthy herdowners have always had in terms of pastoral risk insurance and of building up "patron" status by offering employment and providing food relief to those who are impoverished.

With the complex and fractional nature of Orma livestock rights, it is difficult to obtain meaningful and accurate figures pertaining to wealthy individual herdowners, livestock holdings or average herd sizes. Herds of between 300-400 cattle and camels are often viewed as "excessively" wealthy (Ensminger 1984: 99-102). Near Garissa, however, lives a "very rich man" said to have between 1200 to 1500 head of cattle and 500 to 700 small stock. Most elders allege that herd sizes were much larger and in a better general condition in the days when there were apprentice and warrior herdsmen. Nevertheless, a few make mention that there had been a horrific loss of livestock suffered before colonial rule (this was, undoubtedly, the years of the great rinderpest epidemics known as *Mutai* by

the Samburu and *Tiite c'inaaca gur'aacca* by the Boran [see Baxter 1986] when most of the herds of the East African pastoral groups were devastated).

A pastoral undertaking still remains largely a family enterprise that provides domestic and quasi-domestic labour. Many of the problems of social control are also still the same: how to watch over what is happening when stock are on *fora*, how to avoid overmilking, and how to detect cheating at slaughter. True, the problem of outright theft is perhaps easier to deal with today for the herdowner who wants to employ wage labour rather than use his own family labour, particularly if he has links with the agencies of law and order and can make use of improvements in communication. Change has also taken place with respect to the supply of labourers seeking employment. As we have seen there is now a large pool of unemployed Orma looking for work and herdowners can virtually "pick and choose" whom they want as herders. In addition to sons-in-law performing bride services there are also individual members looking for work coming from other pastoral peoples, predominantly destitute Boran who are undergoing many of the same difficulties as their Orma kinsmen.

### Shamba Managers

The irrigation schemes which are the last resort of many stockless families provide an additional opportunity for investment for wealthy families. The utilization of wage employees is an even more prominent feature in the *shambas* than in livestock rearing. Although the settlement schemes were originally designed for the sedentarization of impoverished former pastoralists, many of the new Orma "elite" have, through capital expenditure, gradually taken on the role of plottolders and now control substantial tracts of land. Most of the former owners of the *shambas* are now employees and tend to the plots which no longer belong to them. Some of the managers of the larger internationally aided schemes regret that room was left for the wealthy Orma to take advantage in this way, but

they note at the same time that they are "much more efficient" and "provide an example" to others. Those relying on wage labour can supply a more continuous labour input than can the poorer tenants on the schemes, and they are usually able to maintain their fields in a better state and even to cope with plots that are larger than those of the destitutes - up to five or six acres as compared with one-half to two acres. Their produce is sold to other pastoralists, grocers in the towns, or consumed as a supplement to the family diet. As a reserve activity the *shamba* remains important, for it provides an alternative to milk and other animal products through times when these are scarce. At other times, the garden provides handy additional cash; the sale of a small amount of maize is fairly straightforward and never as complicated as the sale of an animal. As a last point, owning and producing from a *shamba* when one is not wholly dependent on it is a sign of "development-mindedness", an important aspect in Kenyan society today.

#### Traders and Businessmen

Another occupation of concern for the Orma elite, and which is similarly associated with development, is that of trade. Historically Orma have never been particularly successful as traders, leaving it to Swahili or Somali middlemen. There have been scattered instances of attempts in the *duka* profession but few have prospered (see Ensminger 1984: 71). Today, most Orma owned shops are rented out to or managed by Somali and Swahili merchants even though the majority are registered as having Orma owners.

Those Orma who do venture into trade are however (and have been) relatively free from the serious political constraints that have hampered other ethnic groups active in the profession. The Somali during the *Shifita* Emergency, and the Arab and Asian traders during the post-independence "Africanization" campaigns, were all frustrated in their attempts to maintain trading licenses. However, it has not been difficult for the Orma to obtain trading licenses and personal loans from local government funding sources. Funds come primarily through the county councils on which there tend to be a significant number

of Orma members. The general failure of most Orma shopkeepers to expand, or even to maintain, retail businesses appears all the more puzzling since trade is regarded as prestigious and ranks prominently in the ambitions of wealthy Orma. Examples of rapid business careers and opportunities for profit are continuously present in the form of Somali and Swahili traders who manage well-stocked retail shops without any apparent problems of continuity. Indeed, it is said that these individuals are able skillfully to manipulate the grain and cattle trade in times of drought while consistently undertaking high profit, but high risk, ventures into the game trophy, ivory or *miraa* trade.

The relatively high percentage of abortive attempts by Ormas at starting and operating a business can perhaps be related to the relative ease with which an initial attempt can be made. Those Orma who are shopowners use their household dependents as shop assistants, thereby reducing the cost of labour. Further savings are made when a room in the iron-roofed mud town houses is easily converted from a residential living-space to a *duka* (providing, of course, that the owner has a trading permit). Generally, local shops are sparsely furnished with only a rough wooden counter and a couple of shelves to display the goods for sale.

The *dukas* maintain no specialized assortment of merchandise but all supply simple manufactured goods. The products in greatest demand, though, are not manufactured items, but commodities and food staples such as maize meal, wheat, tea and sugar which are sold in small quantities directly from the sack. Lack of sufficient capital for stocking and re-stocking is cited as the major hindrance in business.

Maintaining the *duka* in a well-stocked condition presents another difficulty for the Orma merchant as a result of the erratic wholesale marketing system of (northern) coastal Kenya. The supply found in a rural or town *duka* is often extremely limited. It is difficult to obtain the goods initially and then transport them from the wholesalers to the shop. I did not come across any Orma merchants who owned mechanized transport. Trucks are a necessity in this area where market centers are spaced at fairly distant intervals from each

other. However, even mechanized transport does not always mean access to goods in the North as shortages of essential commodities (tea, sugar, maize meal and wheat) occur frequently at the wholesale level.

The small-scale Orma trader also confronts problems of a different nature, related to the contradictions between traditional norms of interpersonal help and the demands of business. Marris and Somerset (1971: 157) aptly describe the dilemma of East African retail traders, in a way which applies to the situation of the Orma traders quite well:

A businessman, especially if he runs a retail business in his own community, is obviously vulnerable to the pressures of social organization. His wealth is exposed on his shelves, in the goods people want: and it seems far more than it is since the elderly widow who needs a packet of sugar she cannot pay for or the cousin who has spent all his wages on school fees sees the goods themselves... When he (the shopkeeper) demands cash the district officer is offended, the poor accuse him of meanness and his family rebuke his selfishness...

In this context it is interesting to compare the Orma traders with those "town Somali" who dominate the small trading businesses. Apart from the fact that these Somali merchants have access to trading contacts throughout the Horn of Africa, they do not appear to be hampered by social obligations to destitute relatives. Obligations to extend credit to very poor in-laws and clansmen can be a particularly heavy burden to the Orma traders, but the Somali merchant is able to refuse credit when not given security in the form of small stock, for example. This difference between Somali and Orma traders and merchants who have peripheral community obligations is most operative during episodes of drought. While the larger wholesale dealers prosper during such times because the demands for foodstuffs are greater, the problems tend to increase for the small scale Orma traders particularly as a result of increased pleas for credit from relatives. In times of scarcity, it is difficult to combine being a financially successful trader while maintaining the image of a "good man" in the Oromo sense of one who honours his kin obligations and extends generosity.

Marris and Somerset (1971: 158) describe one of the typical responses to the problem of credit as an attempt to separate private life and business as much as possible. For an Orma man who has political aspirations, this is difficult since his ambitions necessitate generosity and redistribution. The retail trader who is also a local politician obviously deals with things which are most immediately needed by his potential supporters. Food is power in the modern context as well as the traditional one. Nevertheless, there is an important difference. Traditional norms of hospitality do not include the expenditure of capital (i.e. fertile livestock) except in the context of formal religious or lineage-based redistribution. In animal husbandry, the distinction between reproductive animals and food is relatively unambiguous. Capital in the form of money or supplies of foodstuffs has a much less clear-cut character, one which is not always understood by the customers.

The most adept handling of private and business interests is undertaken by men who combine both a sizeable herd with a shop. Livestock can then be used as a source of food for redistribution and demands from hungry relatives and clients can, in critical times, be diverted away from the *duka*. For men who possess both cattle and a shop, the business may contain little room for expansion but continues to function as a kind of subsistence asset which pays off just well enough to subsidize the family members or dependents occupied with its care. A *duka* can provide liquid cash to a herdowner with all his wealth tied up in livestock while serving as a center of social interaction and information-gathering for the politically ambitious.

Because of credit problems, retail trading on the Tana is no less of a risk than pastoralism or *shamba* cultivation. An alternative use of town houses - renting them to others for use as shops or living quarters - has the advantage of being more profitable. Room rentals provide, for many town families, a small but steady income with little labour input.

### Government Employment

Some government offices have a twofold economic importance, namely, chiefship and councillorhood. The latter is a political office which functions like a salaried job since it is endowed with significant allowances which correspond to the salary of a civil servant. The former is a regular job, but of a semi-political character. They are both sources of regular income and at the same time provide access to important economic resources, such as control over employment opportunities, licensing, loans, certificates for town plots and (allegedly, though it is difficult to substantiate) access to certain public funds.

Until the late 1960s, local government was responsible for primary education, medical services and the maintenance of some rural roads. Today, these functions have been taken over by the central government. The county council remains responsible for town sanitation, a few functions related to livestock production (cattle dips, hides and skin inspection, slaughter houses, etc.) and with certain aspects of agriculture (disease and pest control). Apart from these, and of lesser political significance, the county council controls markets and rural trade, has a say in the appointment of area chiefs, and is the trustee for all designated "Tribal Trust" land in the county. As such the council wields considerable influence over the distribution of compensation. When such trust land is alienated, the council decides on the allocation of town plots, and is the recipient of any revenues from the game reserves in the area.

Since independence the councillors have taken over some of the functions that belonged to the chiefs in the colonial structure. The chief was the only officially recognized authority representing the Orma during the colonial era. In the post-colonial situation the functions of the old chiefdoms as they existed during the colonial period have been distributed over a larger number of officials. Nevertheless, chiefs remain politically important individuals in their communities and are accorded a great measure of respect. They are in charge of implementing administrative decisions at the local level and have a number of administrative police under their control. The chief chairs, or plays a dominant role, in the local

development, school, and agricultural committees. They have direct influence over the allocation of irrigation plots, particularly in the unaided schemes. Their mandate is to be instrumental in initiating modern *harambee* projects, such as the building of primary schools, medical centers, wells, etc. Another significant task, since the *Shifita* Emergency and droughts, has been overseeing the distribution of famine relief supplies shipped from the central government or from international charity organizations.

### Stabilized Inequality

Prior to the *Shifita* Emergency, being wealthy, in the sense of having a large number of livestock, was important for a man's chances of reducing the risks of pastoral life and increasing his productivity. Sons of such rich men had advantages when it came to being chosen for appointments of honor and ritual/jural (or *jallaba*) authority within the lineage system and, earlier, within the systems of age and generation classes. Today the most important features of the stratification system remain the increased opportunities for the wealthy to reduce risks and to give their children relative advantages. This has the consequence that the existing differences of wealth and influence between families, even between pastoral families are tending to become permanent features of the local sociology.

Inequalities originating from more or less temporary discrepancies in household and herd development have tended to become transformed into the more apparent forms of stratification. Among contemporary Tana Orma, different forms of wealth (in the form of cattle, small stock, *duka* and sizeable *shamba* plots) tend to cluster in the same families - those with traditional authority, administrative prominence and political success. These families are the elite, both in the modern and traditional spheres, and enjoy advantages of great recuperative power, possessing bases from which they can rapidly re-establish themselves into the livestock economy when it has been struck by losses due to drought, disease or war. Viewed from the other end, the most successful herdowners of today are

often people who, even before the disasters of the past two decades, established drought-secure forms of "insurance" and followed diversified household strategies.

In a typical career, control over one particular resource, becomes so to speak, the "springboard" for moving into a second or third investment niche. The Orma operator cultivates opportunities in a number of fields simultaneously, in order to achieve an optimal mix. The path that leads to the most favorable constellation may begin with either extraordinary pastoral success or good fortune in trade or even employment within the government administration. The turning point may be the first acquisition of a drought-secure resource but, ultimately, it is the combination of activities within the different spheres that is advantageous rather than monopoly control over any one specific form of economic resource.

The inequality that we see in Orma society today is thus largely the result of a crystallization of the administrative-politico-commercial elite which began to develop in the colonial period and of the more recent and drastic impoverishment of the *Shifita* and drought periods. These last two occurrences have expressed themselves in three closely related processes that could be summarized as "peasantization", "proletarianization" and "marginalization".

"Peasantization" largely refers to the integration of households as producers of agricultural commodities within a cash economy. They continue to covet land and livestock and regard it as an indispensable means of providing successive generations of households with the basic necessities of life and not merely one thing among many in which capital may be invested for profit. By "proletarianization" is meant the process whereby people become increasingly dependent on the direct marketing of their own labour.

"Marginalization", the final component of the triad, refers to the creation of a societal subsection of "marginals" who do not control any capital assets whatsoever and whose labour has very low marketable value: the "poorest of the poor" represented by the squatters in the *manyattas*.

It may be tempting to see these processes of impoverishment as being closely related to the creation of an Orma elite, perhaps as necessary concomitants of it. But as we have seen, the core of the present elite is made up of a number of families who were able to re-establish themselves rapidly after the period of crises through an advantageous combination of resources that they had already achieved in the pre-independence period. The processes generated by the interaction of the traditional livestock economy and the larger political and economic system might well have created an impoverished class of Orma even without the devastating events of the last twenty years, but, as it is, the consequences of the *Shifita* War and subsequent droughts overshadow any such mechanisms of change.

As noted above, the Orma elite has advantages of security and pastoral recuperative power which are based on both pastoral wealth and on easier access to drought-secure cash assets. An early awareness of the benefits of formal education and better opportunities to educate their children gave them an advantage when they began to seek administrative positions. Their wealth enables them to barter for political support, through which they can gain control over a number of resources that enter into the local economy from outside, such as central government subsidies, tourist revenues, aid and famine relief funds.

It is important to remember that the economic and political system does not end at the district or tribal boundary. What is "upper class" in the local Orma community is, in the wider national context, only a peripheral "petty bourgeoisie". Garissa, Bura, Hola and Garsen are marginal to the areas where the most rapid economic development takes place, where the big profits are made, and where the national elite have their interests - the former White Highlands and the high potential agricultural areas of Central, Western and Nyanza Provinces.

## Chapter Seven

## Conclusion

Pastoralism Under Pressure

The catastrophes of the *Shifita* War and the droughts that followed might appear to be peculiar to the local situation in which the Orma now find themselves but the general directions of change in the Tana River District closely adheres to a pattern commonly reported elsewhere among African pastoralists. Indeed, an analysis of the situation confronting the Orma can point out similar occurrences for the understanding of socio-economic change in other cases of African pastoral societies. Irrespective of the particular ecological adaptation of each individual pastoral group, there are many features which these societies have in common in the way in which they relate to external sources of economic and political power.

Pastoral societies are frequently economically and politically peripheral to those socio-economic systems which dominate them. They occupy areas which have, to a large extent, been ignored for no other reason than their scarcity of natural resources, and they have few means of bringing pressure to bear on the powers that be in the capital. A decentralized internal structure minimizes their opportunities for exerting political pressure within the context of the modern state, and groups which have for decades maintained local political autonomy through mobility and knowledge of an inaccessible terrain may today be forced to submit to those controlling the modern means of transportation and military technology.

The *Shifita* War, therefore, was not such a unique local experience as one would initially surmise, but is, perhaps, typical of the modern subjugation of areas which used to be in the "insurrection zone", to quote an expression used by Swift (1978: 8). Swift makes the point that as one moves away from the dominant center of a society, there are sometimes successive geographical zones where different types of control are maintained: there may be an "inner" area which is fully controlled and administered by the central

government and another band of territory where government is represented only by a few agents, tax collectors, missionaries and the military - a zone which periodically escapes completely from central government control (Swift 1978: 8-11). Though these latter areas have traditionally been the niche of pastoralism, they have become less and less distanced from the central government, especially as the technology of control is developed. The encapsulation of the pastoral community into national life appears to be inevitable in most places today. This process of encapsulation involves the removal of decision-making over vital subsistence resources from local control and/or the concentration of such decision-making power in the hands of a few people who are more or less immune from social control by the local population. The end result of this alienation is an increasingly reduced resource base for the majority of herdsmen.

Most pastoral societies in tropical Africa appear to have their own histories of losing pasture land as a result of increased arid land cultivation caused by pressure on land in the farming zones, or by the establishment of commercial, ranch type enterprises and tourist resorts or mineral exploitation. Such losses frequently impinge on the more humid and better watered areas of pastoral land, zones which are important for the long-term continuity of the pastoral adaptation, but which may appear under-exploited when they are considered in isolation from the larger pattern of pastoral land use or judged from within a limited time perspective. Losses of such lands cause the remaining, more arid areas to be exploited more intensively and this practice undermines the productivity and ecological conservation of the arid land resources as a whole.

At the same time there are many extraneous factors which are apt to change the internal structure of the pastoral society. There may, as in the case of the wealthy Orma, be new alternative goals of investment and means of insurance against drought which, in the long run, cause the economically successful pastoralists to turn away from traditional forms of insurance based on exchange or loans of livestock. Access to government support may lead to the concentration of certain water supplies or grazing areas in private hands or may

make it easier to utilize hired labour. In certain cases, wealthy members of the pastoral society, or immigrant entrepreneurs utilize technical innovations which demand money but which increase the efficiency of livestock production, such as using trucks to transport animals between different pastures, drilling and building private water points (or boreholes) by mechanized techniques or using veterinary facilities in a more efficient manner. Paradoxically, at the same time as the resource base of the pastoral system as a whole is withered away, so that many people are forced out from pastoralism completely or partially, there appear improved opportunities for the wealthier herdowners to maintain themselves in spite of climatic fluctuations and other hazards.

Thus despite internal differences of social structure and ecological adaptation, the pattern of economic and political relations of pastoral societies in Africa with the outside world tend to generate similar processes of change within them. Their future viability as independent societies depends on a few crucial factors: on the one hand, the pressure to alienate land from them in favour of other forms of land-use which leads to a weakening of traditional adaptations of production, and, on the other, the nation's need for them to act as reserves of cheap, unskilled labour and sources of meat for an ever-expanding urban rate of consumption and even for international export.

### Pastoralism at a Loss

Change in the desert is impossible to guide with any precision as the countless number of failed schemes and the degraded areas attest; some of the reasons for this are physical - the remote, difficult country is truly an unrelenting environment - but there are also other psychological and even philosophical obstacles central to the problem of improving life in the North which have been too often ignored in social planning.

Two fundamental points bear mention. First, however harsh the pastoral lifestyle may appear to be it is pursued without any reluctance because it is usually a profitable mode of life. Indeed, pastoralists only relinquish it if they are forced to by some personal disaster,

such as the loss of all their herds. As we have seen, many who have found other work choose eventually to return to the desert after earning enough money to re-invest in new livestock.

Second, the only way to be self-sufficient in a semi-desert environment like that of the Tana River District is to practice at least some form of pastoral activity. Pastoral peoples like the Orma have demonstrated considerable economic and social acumen in the exploitation of their arid rangelands. More recently cultivators who have invested any accumulated surplus in stock have demonstrated similar acumen. So have local traders in the townships, who have invested their profits in stock which they employ indigent pastoralists to herd for them (Little 1985). These individuals do not invest in livestock out of a "simple minded" desire to acquire prestige by conspicuous consumption, but rather because stock have not only been the best investment but are unequalled as a food and cash reserve for protection against famine.

My point is not to maintain that the traditional desert societies are perfect and should be left unchanged; that would be mistaken. But it would be equally mistaken to argue that contemporary change is always for the better. Nairobi's high-rise skyline might be a symbol of success but the city also has its slums and shanty towns and it is all too easy for rural folk like the Orma to exchange rural poverty for urban poverty. Only the merest handful of nomads from the northern reaches have successfully moved into a comfortable life down country. Most wind up in poorly paying low-grade jobs, usually as night watchmen, idling their days in the slums and their nights on concrete pavements, dreaming of their father's or grandfather's herds and longing for the taste of cattle or camel milk.

Too many of the youths who have been to the mission schools in the desert finish up leaning against the verandahs of squalid shops in centres like Garissa or Garsen; their semi-education disqualifies them a viable alternative. Paradoxically, their uneducated brothers who were apprenticed in the *fora* or other cattle and camel camps may be better off. In any case, Kenya's severe problem of population growth (four per cent per year)

means that there is already a surplus of young people without employment in the highly populated areas of highland and southern Kenya. There is certainly no room for migrants from the desert (see Jones 1984).

For pastoral families nowadays, the loss of their herds and flocks results in destitution and long term dependency on food aid. Impoverished agriculturalists can be restarted with donations of seed and food to tide them over until the new crops can be harvested, but to re-establish a herd takes either a considerable capital outlay or the provision of supplementary food for a decade or more until until a ewe or a nanny goat or two can grow into a flock, and the flock in its turn be converted, by trade and exchange, into a herd (Baxter 1986: 11). In effect, as this research has demonstrated, it is now almost impossible for even the most able, dedicated and industrious family to break away from this new cycle of destitution and to re-enter the pastoral economy through its own unaided efforts. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the poorer herders to maintain a foothold in the pastoral economy at all, let alone to increase their herds and flocks.

Another paradox: the poor need cash more than the wealthy for they must buy food and ensure their children an education simply because they have no stock with which to set them up on their own. The poor, again and again, are forced to sell their livestock before they can breed from it. In most northern livestock markets, the cattle buyers are usually entrepreneurs from southern Kenya who drive very hard bargains. As a result, the pastoralists only sell when they are desperate, which usually corresponds to the dry season when the land is already overgrazed, the animals are thin and the price of grain is high. Thus the herdsmen feel swindled and their reluctance to sell is reinforced. It is becoming increasingly difficult to get started again after heavy stock losses, and social and economic stratification is becoming both sharper and more enduring. It is a depressing picture of a way of life caught in a slowly closing trap sprung by internal raiding and international warfare, ecological malpractices and ineffective aid. Once proud peoples are now poor, pitied and patronised.

We have then, what seems to be a strange problem. The pastoral peoples have always survived and flourished in the arid zones up to the last twenty years or so. True, they did suffer from droughts and famines but always managed to restore their pastoral economies, even if after acute suffering, and maintained their cultures intact. But now, despite heroic inputs of aid and development funds, with modern transport networks and technical and medical facilities, and with all the international humanitarian concern many, perhaps even the majority, of arid zone pastoralists are hungry and food-dependent and their traditional cultures are seriously threatened.

### Saving a Way of Life

So far this chapter has been a woeful and gloomy chronicle of passive responses to blows received rather than of blows exchanged: the battered pastoralists have covered their heads and ducked and weaved against the ropes, trying to avoid a knockout blow. Family life and core social and economic relationships have taken a beating. Pastoral men have grown accustomed to having their skills devalued, and have adapted to migrant labour and shanty town life: as their womenfolk have adapted to getting by on relief handouts while trying to maintain, if they are lucky, a heifer or two and a few sheep or goats (see Baxter 1986: 19).

Nevertheless, in the prevailing gloom the pastoral spark still glows and there is a faint glimmer of light. In Kenya a recent wide-ranging multidisciplinary study established jointly by UNEP and UNESCO has added immeasurably to the pool of knowledge about desert life (see O'Leary 1985a, 1985b and Stiles 1981). This Integrated Project in Arid Lands (IPAL) used part of the Rendille and Gabbra ranges for its study area with the intention to discover solutions to the problems of semi-deserts and other arid lands which could be applied on a global level. Whatever the wider applicability of the findings, we now know significantly more than we used to about Northern Kenyan pastoralism.

The complex plan which organizations such as UNEP and IPAL has produced involves making many changes but, significantly, what is envisioned is a "restructuring" of pastoralism and not its "elimination". The total number of animals must be reduced and pastoralists must be willing to sell off some of their livestock on a regular basis, so it will be imperative to have a proper marketing system which will assure them a fair return.

In addition and, if possible, damaged arid lands must be reclaimed by re-planting with desert shrubs and grasses. Seriously damaged and degraded areas must be rendered inaccessible in order that they might recover. It is envisioned that it might be possible to introduce exotic species of desert vegetation which will prove nourishing to domestic stock.

Another vital factor is to improve law and order in northern Kenya so that herders can take their animals into areas they now avoid through fear of raiding. A peculiar characteristic of pastoral societies is a failure to come permanently to terms with neighbors. According to the IPAL study 40% of available grazing land in northern Kenya was left unused precisely because of this problem.

Even if all these aims were achieved, it would still be necessary to plan for droughts. In arid environments periodic droughts should not be regarded as unexpected disasters but rather as an inevitable fact of life for which contingency plans must be made; there should either be ready supplies of food or money in the bank. The onslaught of a drought or deluge should never come as a surprise and catch the Administration unprepared. Yet the question remains whether the traditional societies themselves prove able to adjust in spite of their inbuilt conservatism? Some would doubt if any fruitful change could come from outside a society, but having inflicted the hypodermic needle and the borehole on the pastoral nomads the "developed" world has an obligation to help them find a way through.

### The Orma in the Twenty-First Century

It is difficult to say what the next century has in store for the Orma. To be sure, a pastoral adaptation of some sort will remain their best chance of survival in an environment that, undoubtedly, will continue to be harsh and unrelenting.

While conducted with the greatest of intentions, the various "development" projects along the Tana have virtually failed to improve the lot of either the agriculturalists or the nomads to any significant degree. Any successes in the irrigation schemes are usually monopolized by those who are already wealthy and are seeking to diversify further with another investment. Kamba and Pokomo farmers also have an inside edge. Perhaps a restocking of the Orma herds and a more equitable position within the national economy would be a better method. Nomads must be given access to educational resources and a greater say in the national policy affecting their lives. A guaranteed base price for their flocks and herds sold for slaughter and for their various products is also essential. In this way and at the same time, the Orma will be better inclined to sell their animals for the agricultural products of other Kenyans which they have acquired a taste for and save their pastures from dessication due to overgrazing.

This smaller-scale approach to development can work. Oxfam, for example, recognizing that the skills of the people and under-utilized grazing and browse are primary resources, have initiated a restocking project which seeks to restart the destitute pastoralists where they can best utilize their skills (see Hogg 1985). Working with the people rather than against them seems a cost-effective, sensible and hopeful solution.

An encouraging sign of spontaneous development has been reported from the Turkana camps by Richard Hogg, who was instrumental in launching the Oxfam restocking project:

Over the years Turkana have become used to famine relief food and have come to treat it as just another economic resource to be exploited. Acquiring food relief is just one more activity. An effect of famine relief is therefore to enlarge economic horizons by providing for further economic diversification...One of the main benefits of relief food...has been that it has enabled herd owners to

maintain their livestock herds. Without (relief) maize they would have been forced to eat into their capital. The relatively well off can use the maize they sell or barter for livestock, or to brew beer, the profits of which can be used to acquire livestock...a woman brewer can make 40-50 shillings a week if she works hard...beer brewing is enabling many families to earn money, (and) slowly rebuild their flocks. (Baxter 1986: 20-21).

Such relief becomes developmental aid and, compared to the millions of dollars which have drained away into the sand in irrigation and other projects, very low cost and highly effective aid. We have learned, or at least are learning, to respect African traditional medical knowledge and practices (Last & Chavanduka 1986) and agricultural knowledge and practices (Richards 1985). It remains to respect and utilize the knowledge of African pastoralists, and the productivity of the pastoral management system they have devised to cope with the hardships and hazards of wresting a subsistence from the arid zones. They have proved their resilience, adaptability and productiveness.

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## Appendix I

## Glossary of Various Terms

| Sw - Swahili     |   | E - English  | Am - Amharic  |
|------------------|---|--|---------------|
| Or - Oromo       |   | H - Hindi  | Sam - Samburu |
| aba (Or)         | - | father   |               |
| aannan (Or)      | - | milk   |               |
| angafa (Or)      | - | eldest son, also a name for the Boran  |               |
| anjera (Or)      | - | a sour "spongy" bread made from the t'eff grain  |               |
| askari (Sw)      | - | soldier or security guard  |               |
| baakkuu (Or)     | - | not having much milk   |               |
| baraza (Sw)      | - | meeting  |               |
| bona (Or)        | - | summer (dry)   |               |
| chang'aa (Sw)    | - | illegal alcoholic beverage   |               |
| c'orrogee (Or)   | - | producing much milk  |               |
| daba (Or)        | - | enclosure, "strategic village" during the<br>Secessionist War  |               |
| dabarre (Or)     | - | loan of an animal  |               |
| deda (Or)        | - | nomadic grazing community  |               |
| down country (E) | - | northern Kenyan term for the Mombasa-Nairobi-<br>Lake area   |               |
| duka (Sw)        | - | one story retail shop  |               |
| fora (Or)        | - | "fallow herd" of dry stock   |               |
| Gaaf' Daab' (Or) | - | "The Time of Stop", period from approximately<br>1967-72 when almost all the Oromo herds in<br>Kenya had been decimated by war and drought and<br>many people died from starvation   |               |
| gada (Or)        | - | hierarchic system of generation classes  |               |
| ganda (Or)       | - | village  |               |
| ghee (H)         | - | butter fat   |               |
| ganna (Or)       | - | winter (rainy)   |               |
| gogessa (Or)     | - | patriclass   |               |
| harambee (Sw)    | - | means approximately "Let's make a joint effort!"<br>and is the Kenyan term for a self-help project,<br>whether it is a matter of a few neighbors coming<br>together to dig a field or a nation-wide collection<br>of funds to build a facility of some sort. |               |
| hawicha (Or)     | - | herd of milch cattle kept at main camp   |               |
| hoteli (Sw)      | - | restaurant and resting place   |               |
| ilato (Or)       | - | an individual who is an exceptional and well-<br>respected herder  |               |
| jallaba (Or)     | - | deputy "justice of the peace", appointed leader of<br>a local lineage  |               |

|                               |   |  |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| kallu (Or)                    | - | the traditional spiritual and ritual leader of all the Oromo   |
| kayas (Sw)                    | - | fortified villages situated on hilltops constructed and inhabited by the Mijikenda   |
| komiti (Sw)                   | - | member of local governmental committee   |
| manyatta (Sw)                 | - | squatter settlement, mainly of traditionally shaped huts outside the market center or town; originally Maasai temporary encampment   |
| Mijikenda (Sw)                | - | a group of nine culturally similar peoples who live on or near the Kenya coast; they are the Kwale (Digo), Giriama, Ribe, Jibana, Chonyi, Kambe, Rabai, Kauma and Duruma   |
| mutai (Sam)                   | - | period during the 1880s to 1890s in which extreme drought and cattle epidemics resulted in large scale poverty and famine for the Samburu                                  |
| obbolaa (Or)                  | - | "related person", a general kinship term   |
| ola (Or)                      | - | pastoral camp  |
| posho (Sw)                    | - | maize meal, maize porridge   |
| qaat (Sw)                     | - | a toxicant drug that affects the central nervous system, also known as "chat"; leaves of the <i>Catha Edulis</i>   |
| re (Or)                       | - | sheep and goats collectively   |
| shamba (Sw)                   | - | small cultivation plot, garden, field  |
| shifaa (Am)                   | - | secessionist guerilla, originally "bandit"   |
| taka (Sw)                     | - | originally zakat (Arabic), stipulated annual Muslim levy on wealth   |
| Tiite c'inaaca gur'aacca (Or) | - | "When flies blackened the ribs", period during the 1880s and 1890s in which extreme drought and cattle epidemics resulted in wide ranging poverty and famine for the Boran |
| worra (Or)                    | - | homestead or domestic unit comprised of the nuclear family and other affines   |

## Appendix II

## Central Places in the Tana River and Garissa Districts

| Principal Towns | Administrative District | Urban Centres      | Rural Centres           | Market Centres   | Local Centres   |
|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--|---|
|                 | Tana River              | Hola<br>(5,100)    | Garsen                  | Kipini<br>Bura<br>Masalini<br>Balambala<br>Mororo          | Masabubu<br>Saka<br>Korokora<br>Sankuri<br>Wenje<br>Tarasa/Ngao<br>Nanighi<br>Mnazini<br>Makere |
|                 | Garissa                 | Garissa<br>(2,500) | Mado<br>Gashe<br>Dadaab | Hulugho<br>Ijara<br>Liboi<br>Balambala<br>Bura<br>Masalani | Alinjugur<br>Benane<br>Wardeglo<br>Hara<br>Sankuri<br>Korokora<br>Masabubu<br>Saka              |

(Source: R.A. Obudho, Urbanization in Kenya)

## Appendix III

## List of Maps:

Map 1 - Africa

Map 2 - Kenya: Place Names

Map 3 - Kenya: Ethnic Distribution

Map 4 - Kenya: Provincial Breakdown

Map 5 - Kenya: Tana River District

Map 6 - Garissa

Map 7 - Cushitic-Speaking Peoples

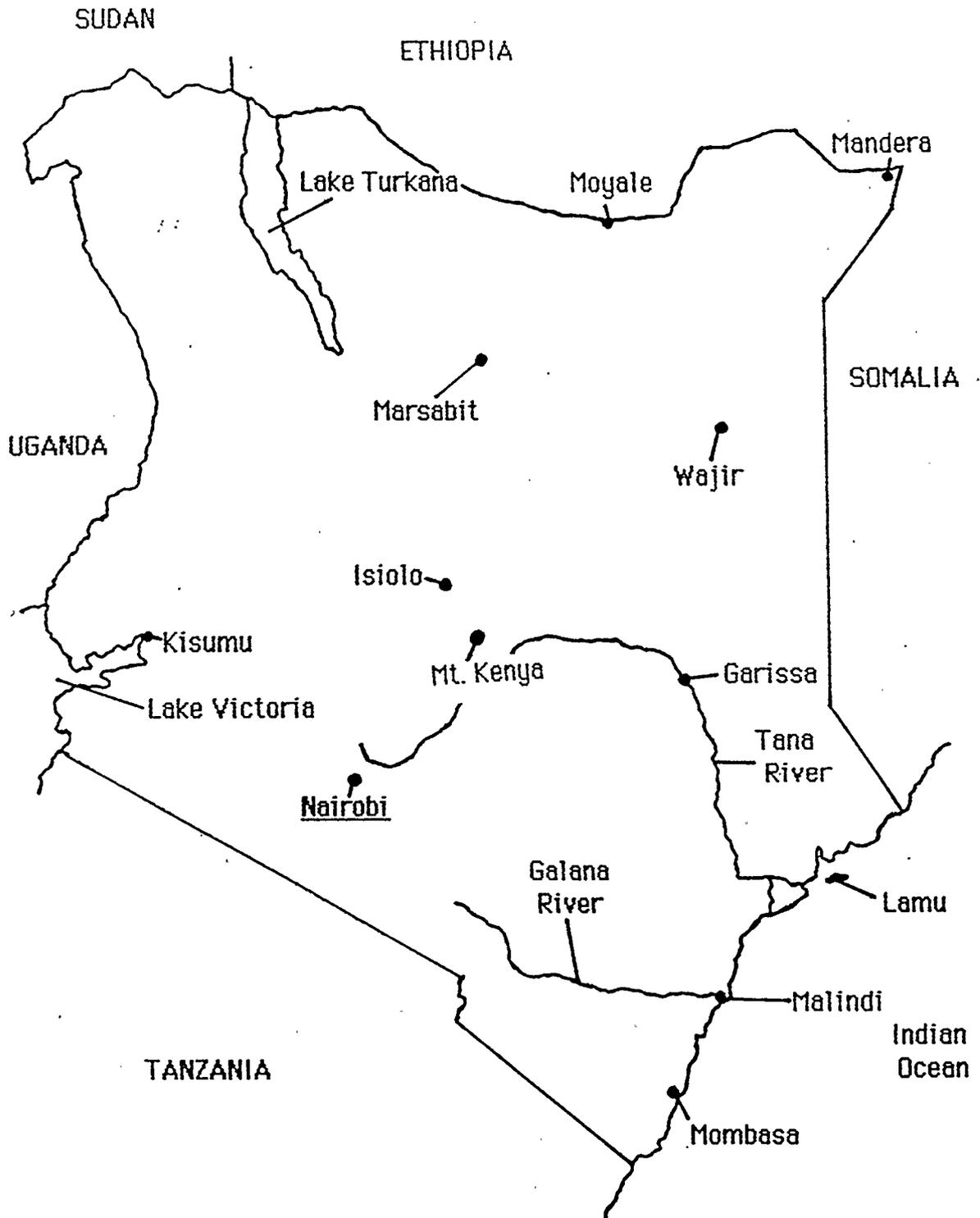
Map 8 - Kenya: Area of Oromo Expansion and Main Settlement Areas Today

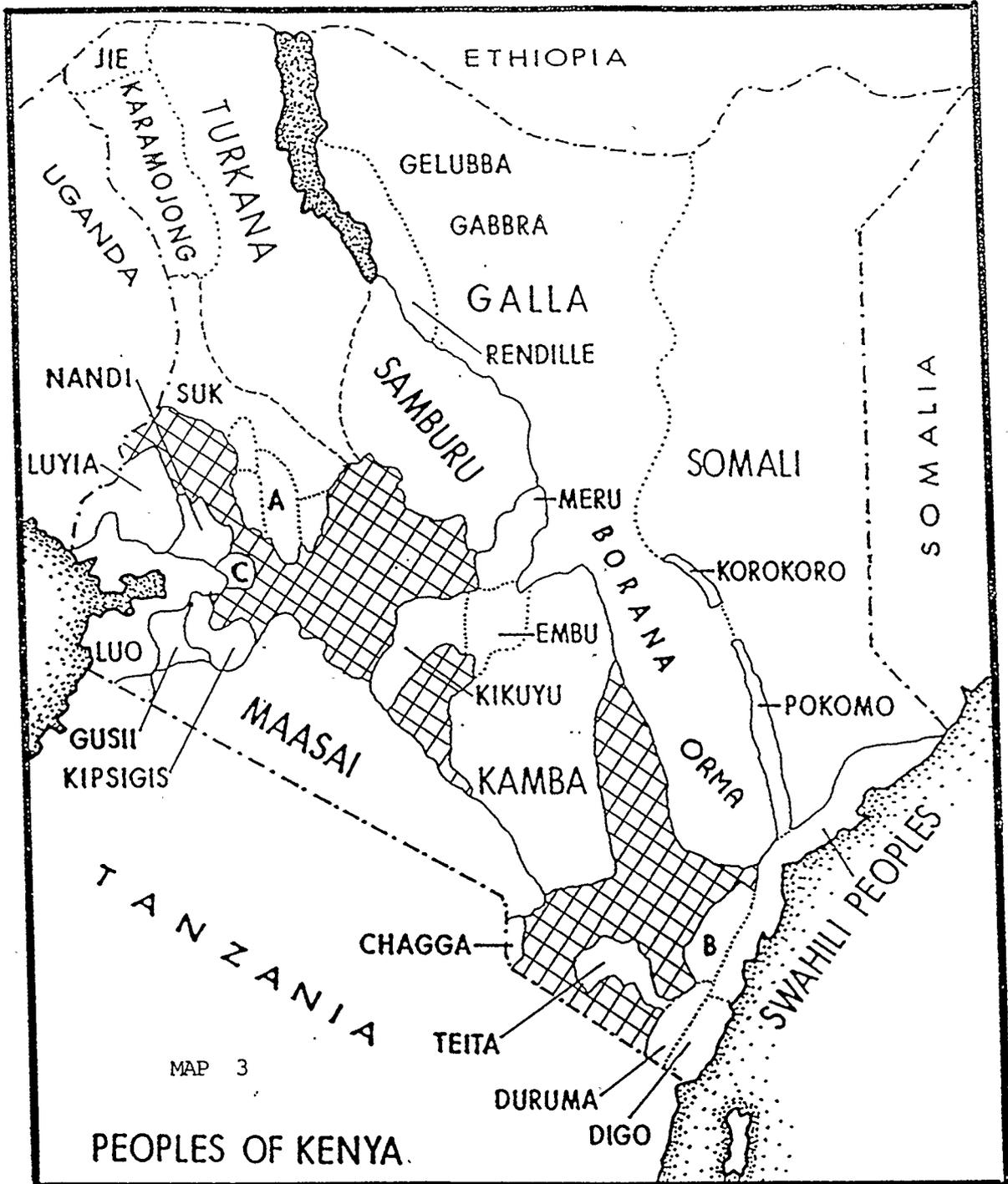
AFRICA

MAP 1



MAP 2



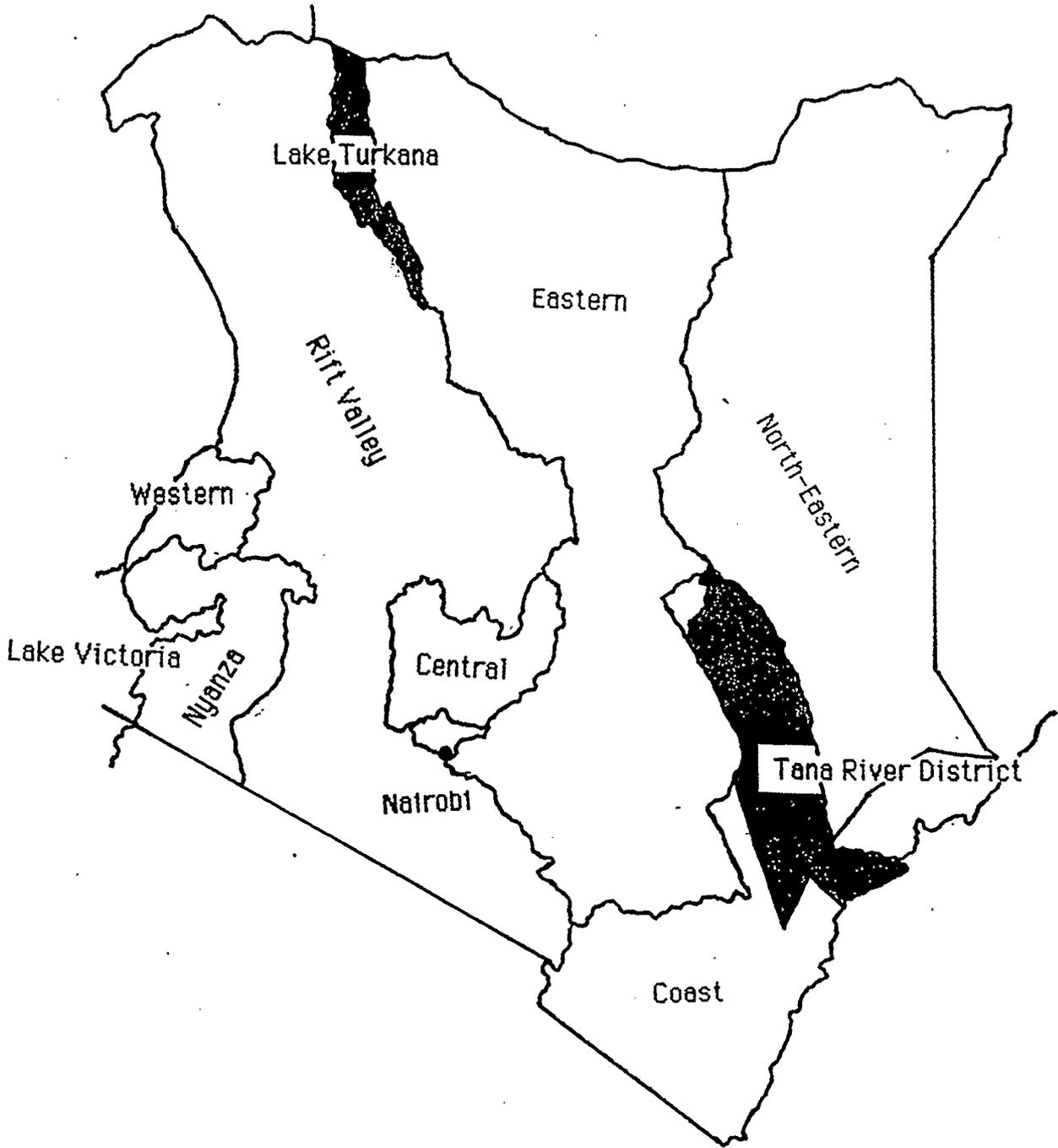


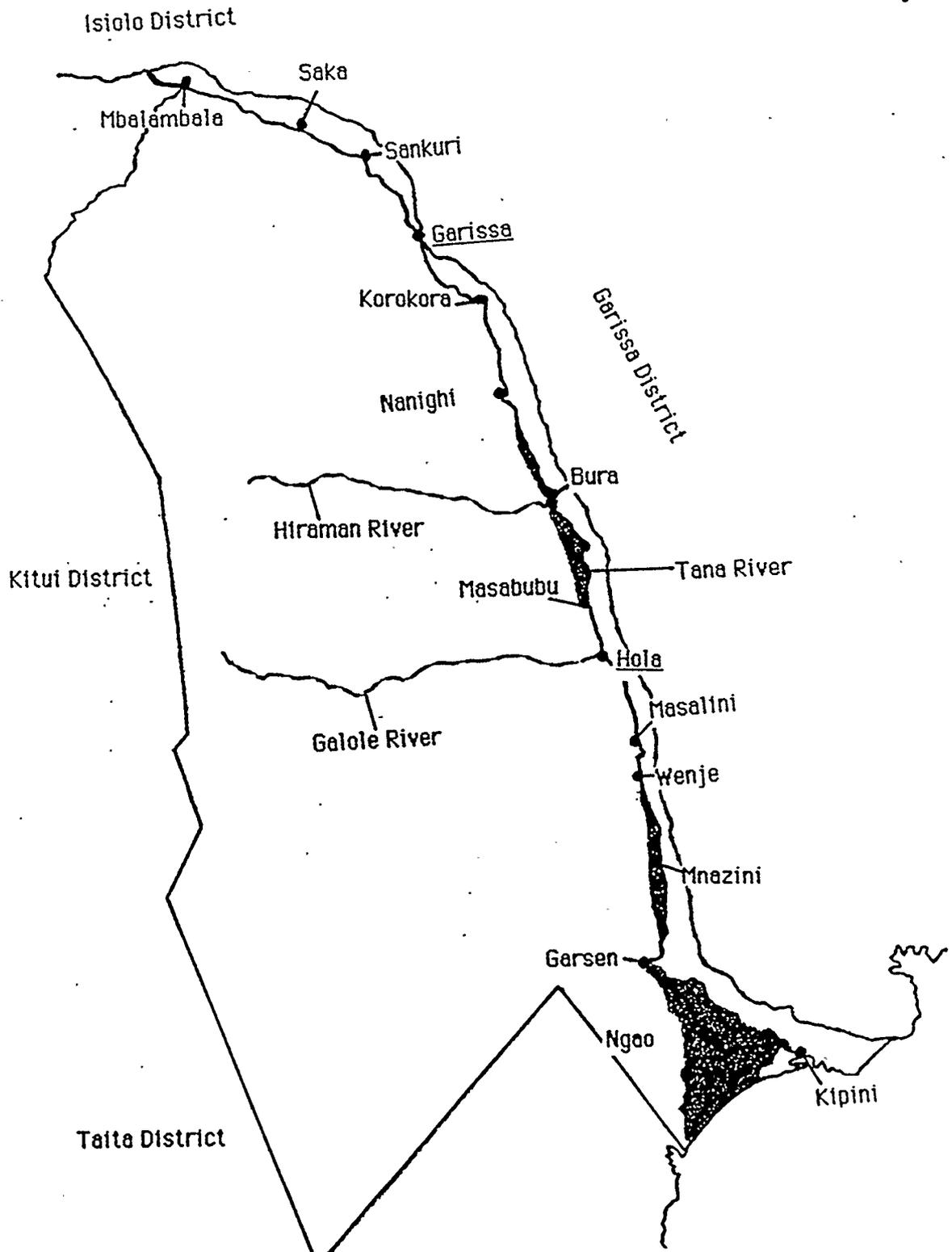
A. MARAKWET, ELGEYON, NJEMPS, TUGEN. B. GIRIYAMA. C. DOROBO.

USED BY PERMISSION FROM DR. D.G. HATT  
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

KENYA: PROVINCIAL BREAKDOWN

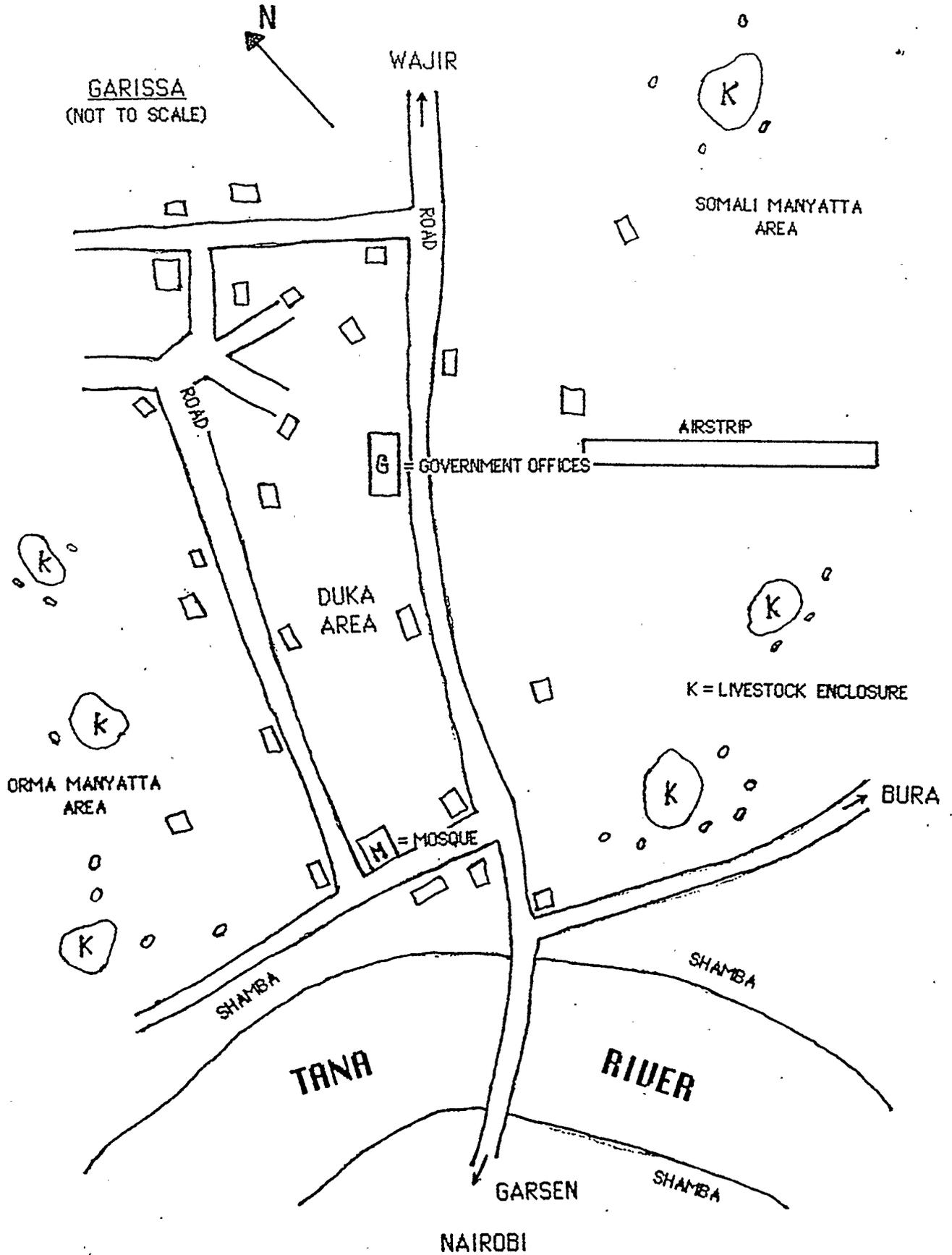
MAP 4



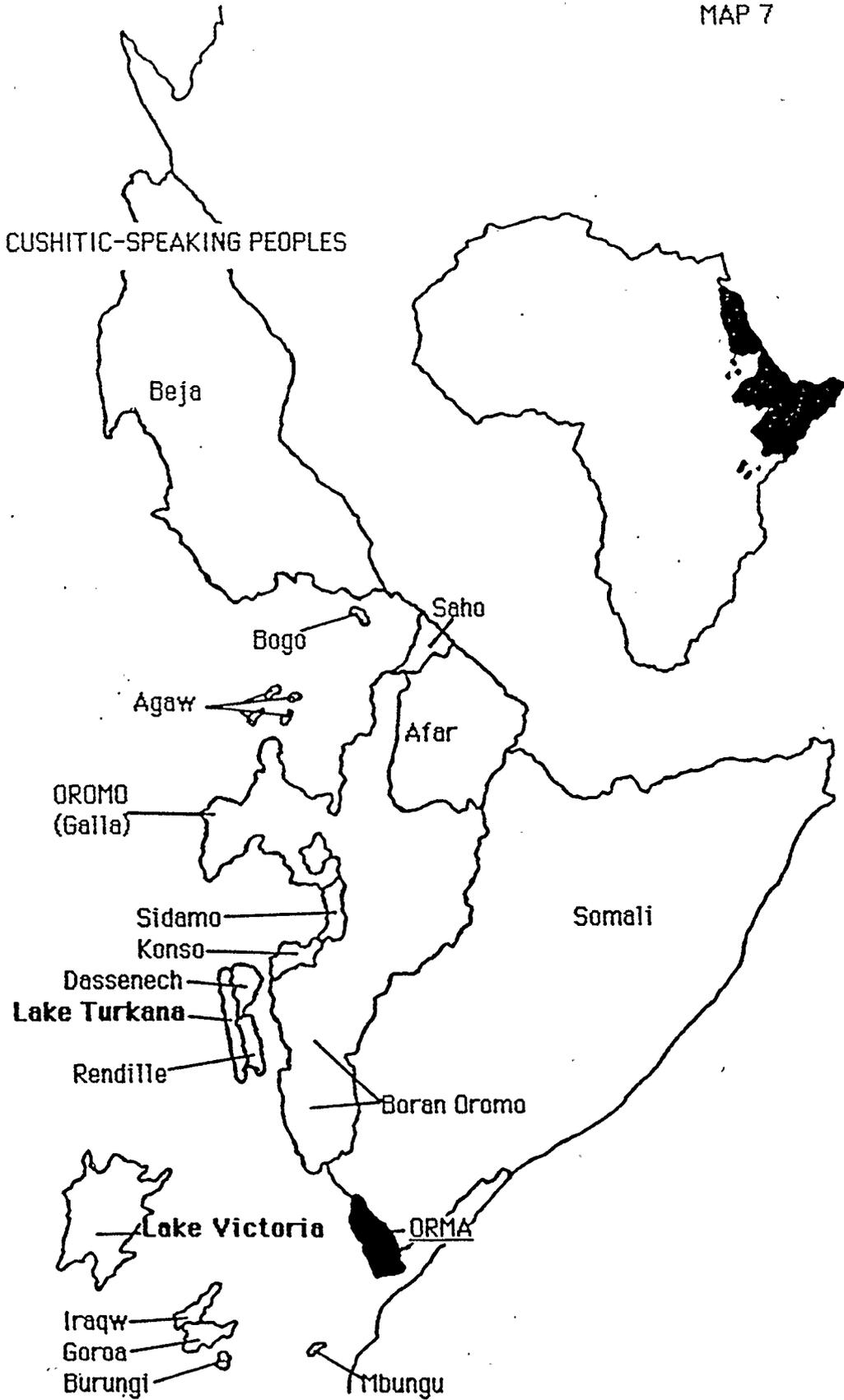


(Source: Bartholomew World Travel Map - Kenya)

MAP 6

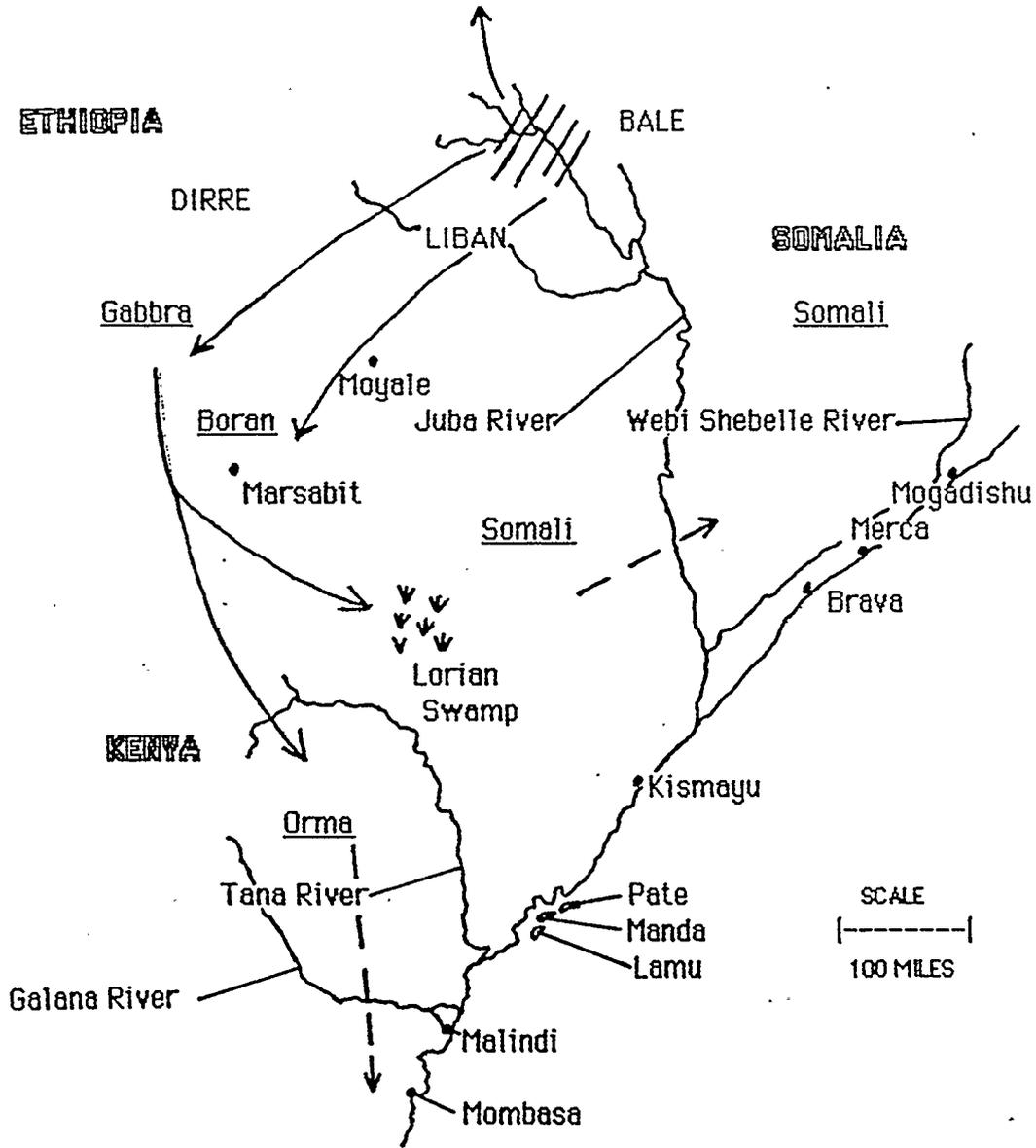


MAP 7



MAP 8

KENYA: AREA OF OROMO EXPANSION & MAIN SETTLEMENT AREAS TODAY



- // - Probable Oromo Homeland
- ← - Areas of Oromo Expansion (Raiding/Migration Routes)
- Orma - Regions Where Peoples Found Today
- ← - - - Expansion Areas Now Vacated