

The politics of drought: The pauperization of Isiolo Boran

Richard Hogg

Faculty of Economic and Social Studies
University of Manchester
Manchester
U.K.

Isiolo Boran are becoming a population of permanent paupers. During the colonial period they were protected from Somali incursions, and their way of life preserved. Since Independence, however, largely as a result of increasing government intervention and market integration, they have become caught in a vicious spiral of poverty and decline.

Keywords: Incorporation; Poverty; Settlement; Pastoral Nomadism; Irrigation; Drought.

INTRODUCTION

Four years ago I wrote an article in *Disasters* (Hogg, 1980) on Boran adaptation to drought and famine. Since then I have returned to Boran for short periods in 1981, 1982 and 1983. On each return visit I found a population increasingly trapped in a vicious spiral of poverty and decline — a decline largely the result of government policy. This paper is concerned to show the effects of national incorporation on Boran vulnerability to drought.

THE PEOPLE

The Boran are an Oromo-speaking people who live dispersed over a vast semi-desert area stretching from the Tana River in Kenya into southern Ethiopia. The Boran of Isiolo District, Kenya, who number some 21,000, are partly cut off from Ethiopian Boran by a wedge of hostile Somali and are recent converts to Islam. During the colonial period they were only marginally involved in the developing market economy and subsisted largely off the yields of their cattle, camels and small stock. Since Independence however, their herds and flocks have been devastated by drought and war, and many have been temporarily forced out of pastoralism.

COLONIAL PERIOD

Boran penetrated into present day Isiolo District in the first two decades of this century. Their arrival in the area was largely the result of Somali pressure from the east. The colonial administration early on recognized Boran occupation of the area, and prevented continued Somali incursions by establishing a Somali - Boran line. Inter-mittent and temporary adjustments were made to this line in drought periods to enable inter-district stock movements.

The policy of the administration, described by one District Commissioner as a "benevolent autocracy" was to keep the peace between the various pastoral groups of the area and to maintain the status quo at the minimum cost and expenditure. This colonial policy, which was common to the arid lands of Uganda and Kenya, was summed up by Sir Geoffrey Archer, one time Officer-in-Charge of the Northern Frontier District of Kenya (N.F.D.):

There is only one way to treat these Northern Territories, the home of nomadic camel, cattle and sheep owning people, and that is to give them what protection we can under the British Flag and, otherwise, to leave them to their own customs, as far as possible, and under their own Chiefs. Anything else is certainly uneconomic . . .

(quoted in Barber, 1968, p. 209)

Almost all colonial administrators believed that clan and tribal boundaries, and the social organizations of different tribes were rigid and clear, so that any infiltration by tribes or segments of tribes across tribal boundaries was both untidy and wrong, and to be discouraged. Each of the pastoral tribes, including Boran, was allotted an exclusive grazing area and encouraged to continue its pastoral nomadic way of life undisturbed within it. The Northern Frontier District was designated a "special area" to be protected from outside influences.

The administration was particularly ambivalent about the benefits of economic development in Northern Kenya. Once economic development encouraged local entrepreneurs and struck at the roots of the prevailing conception of the noble pastoralist there was official concern, for "it felt that trade was occupying too large a part of the peoples' time in unproductive and speculative pursuits," (Smith, 1969, p. 35). A consequence of colonial laissez-faire policy was a regulated economy. Only when external events intervened, such as the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935-1938 and World War II, was there an "open" economy.

Some few Boran, especially chiefs and headmen, did become involved in retail trade, but the vast majority remained almost exclusively involved in pastoral nomadism. For many of these Boran the colonial years were years of prosperity, interrupted by occasional droughts and epidemics. After each of these disasters some families lost their entire stock, and the administration was forced to provide food relief. But the scale of such relief was small and there was little attempt to offer a permanent solution to drought and destitution. It was generally accepted that

pastoral nomadism offered the best means of surviving in a marginal environment.

By and large Boran appear to have benefitted from this policy. Certainly in the late fifties and early sixties wealthy Boran numbered their cattle in the hundreds and their small stock in the thousands. Brown estimated the small stock population of Isiolo District to be 500,000 in 1963, almost 25 small stock per capita. Today Boran look back upon these days as a "golden age."

INDEPENDENCE

Kenyan Independence ended Boran isolation from the rest of the country. The new administration was keen to break down old colonial barriers and to unify the country. In the arid north the apparatus of colonial rule, such as tribal grazing areas, restrictions on inter-district movement, and the Somali-Boran line was dismantled. It was important to the new rulers that tribal distinction should be minimized. The emphasis was on citizenship rather than tribal identity.

The first and most urgent task of the administration was to quell the move among Somali and Isiolo Boran for unification with "Greater Somalia." The *Shifita War* (1963—1969), which involved the Kenya army and Somali irregular forces and sympathizers, was essentially concerned to incorporate within a Greater Somalia most of the N.F.D.

Opinion in northern Kenya was divided on the issue of secession. According to the N.F.D. Commission appointed by the British Government in 1962 to investigate the question, "the division of opinion almost exactly corresponds to the division between Moslem and non-Moslem" (N.F.D., 1962, p. 18). Isiolo Boran supported their Somali co-religionists and favoured unification with Somalia. Nevertheless there was never universal approval for the Somali position, and much anti-Somali feeling was caused by the ambush and killing of the Boran District Commissioner of Isiolo District in 1963. But widespread intimidation and violence by the Kenyan security forces against the local population eventually so alienated local opinion that it swung in favour of secession.

In the war, Boran bore the brunt of Kenya police and army reprisals. From 1966 to 1967 all Boran were forced into three local towns (Garba Tulla, Mado Gashe and Merti), and their livestock prohibited from grazing beyond a five mile radius of each centre. As a result of this enforced concentration of people and stock the majority of herds and flocks were destroyed by disease and lack of pasture. Between 1963 and 1970 the camel population declined by over 95% and the small stock population by over 90%.

Almost overnight Boran were reduced to a population of paupers. Large areas of their former grazing areas were lost to Somali pastoralists, and they were increasingly forced by poverty and Somali pressure to settle near to the Ewaso River. Many Boran also drifted into the small local towns to eke out a living, while others drifted "down-country" to look for jobs.

Shifita through its sustained attack on the Boran economy increased their vulnerability to externally induced change,

and greatly hastened their incorporation into the Kenyan economy; new economic strategies were developed to deal with the change and many were forced to settle permanently at government established irrigation schemes.

DEVELOPMENT

The Government views the arid north of the country as a neglected area, largely untouched by development. The pastoralists who inhabit the area are regarded as conservatives resistant to change. A primary goal of national policy is to increase food production through modernization. In the pastoral areas this means controlling grazing (ranches and grazing blocks), increased water inputs and, wherever possible settlement and cultivation. The terms of the policy are set by agriculturalists, who dominate the government view of development priorities.

The *Shifita* war provided the government with a clear opportunity and mandate to settle Boran. As a result a number of irrigation schemes were established along the Ewaso River. The objectives of the schemes were:

1. to develop the food production potential of the semi-arid regions of Kenya;
2. to provide an opportunity for destitute nomads to lead more stable and prosperous lives through irrigated agriculture and settlement; and
3. to offset the destructive effect of the continuous encroachment of the desert.

The underlying assumption was that agriculture and settlement provided the best solution to destitution among nomads.

MALKA DAKAA SCHEME

Malka Dakaa, which is situated on the Ewaso River some 40 km from Garba Tulla in Isiolo District, was established by the Kenya Government with assistance from FAO/UNDP in 1976. Initially irrigation was to be by diesel pump but later it was planned to excavate a gravity canal. Settlers were given an acre plot to farm, but all plots remained the property of the scheme. The crops planted were chosen by the scheme management. An elected committee of tenants, later a co-operative society represented tenant views to management.

The 160 tenants had no security of tenure, and could be dismissed for failing to attend to their plots. While they were responsible for watering, weeding, planting and harvesting their plots, management provided the tractor for ploughing and the diesel for the pumps. Tenants did not bear any of the costs of irrigation. This was a service provided by government. As a result the tenants themselves remained ignorant of the high costs of the operation.

Because of the hierarchical nature of the organization tenants were deprived of all responsibility for their own scheme. To them it was a government project and they were the workers. So long as they continued to receive benefits from the system in the way of high crop yields this did not

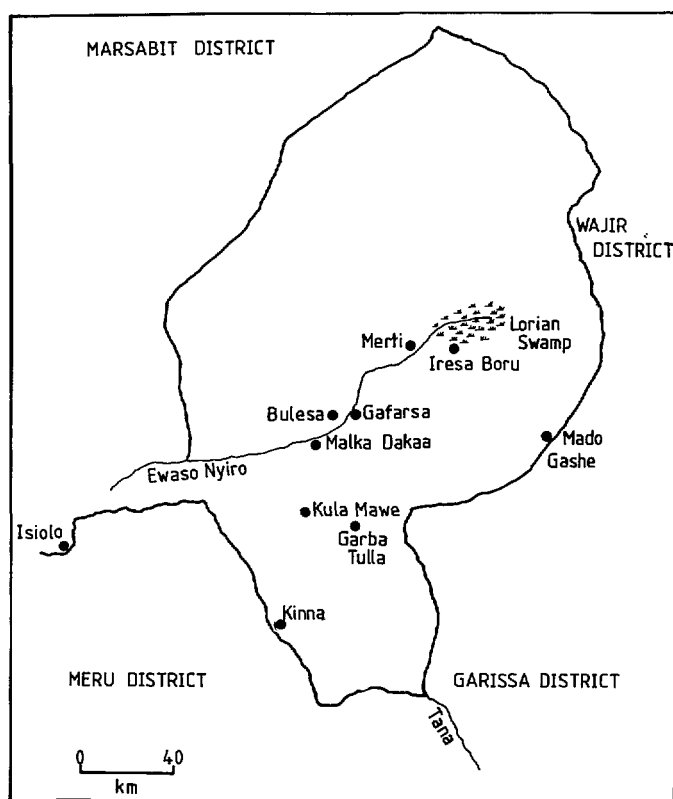


Fig. 1. Isiolo District.

matter, but once the tractors began to break down for lack of spare parts, and the pumps fail to run for lack of diesel, they quickly became disillusioned. Later when they were expected to dig their fields and excavate a gravity canal by hand re-adjustment was difficult. Their introduction to irrigation agriculture had been in the years when donor funds had been plentiful. They had grown used to expecting diesel pumps and tractors to work when they should work. Once donor funds dried up and things did not work as they were expected to, faith in agriculture was quickly lost.

By 1983 the productivity of the scheme had dramatically declined. Donor funds had been withdrawn and what was essentially a capital intensive project was being run on a shoestring. Costly machinery lay rusting and idle in the workshops and in the fields weeds took over from the crops. Most tenants had abandoned the scheme, and had returned to the famine relief lists.

The example of Malka Dakaa is not an isolated one. By 1983 most of the irrigation schemes established in the late sixties and early seventies had collapsed, and the former tenants either returned to full-time pastoralism or to famine relief. The reasons for the collapse were various: mechanization, cost, long distances to market, poor management, corruption, poor soil and lack of tenant participation. The end result was that 15 years or so after *Shifita* many Boran were still dependent on famine relief.

The government programme of irrigation schemes had proved an almost total failure. Development had resulted in a decline rather than an increase in overall food production.

DROUGHT AND DEVELOPMENT

Droughts are recurrent events in marginal pastoral environments. Isiolo District is no exception. District records reveal at least nine major droughts in the last 60 years or so, in 1918—1919, 1928—1929, 1933—1934, 1938—1939, 1943—1945, 1958—1959, 1970—1973, 1975—1976, 1979—1980. Boran responses to drought may be arranged in stages, which correspond to an intensification of moisture loss and pasture scarcity:

1. **Dry season.** A drop in milk yields necessitates an increased intake of grain and meat, and stock are taken to dry season grazing, such as along the Ewaso floodplain and Bisaan' Adi area.

2. **Prolonged dry season.** Grain consumption and animal sales increase, and stock are moved outside the normal range, but within Boranaland.

3. **Drought.** High calf-mortality and livestock sales. Local dry season grazing movements evolve into treks to escape the drought stricken area, even crossing tribal and administrative boundaries.

4. **Prolonged drought.** Many pastoralists can no longer make ends meet and, unless helped by wealthier pastoralists, are forced out of the pastoral sector and/or become absorbed by neighbouring tribes.

Outside intervention, especially since Independence, has meant that recent droughts are more severe in their consequences than similar droughts in the past. Four factors have, in the main, increased Boran vulnerability to climatic vagaries:

1. the reversal after the end of *Shifita* of the old colonial policy of restricting Somali to the east of the Somali - Boran line;
2. the massive livestock losses incurred during *Shifita*, especially the destruction of small stock and camels;
3. the loss of traditional dry season grazing areas to Game Parks, e.g. Bisaan' Adi to Meru National Park;
4. creeping sedentarization and loss of mobility.

This last factor is probably the most damaging to Boran ability to respond to drought.

Since the end of *Shifita* there has been a vigorous attempt on the part of government to expand elements of permanent infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals and communications. The government had a largely captive population, for after *Shifita* and the 1970—1973 drought Boran were dependent on government and relief organizations for

famine relief. Large numbers moved from the pastoral areas to the new urban centres, such as Garba Tulla, Merti and Mado Gashe, where famine relief could be obtained, and to the Ewaso River, a dry season grazing area, where irrigation schemes, primary schools and medical dispensaries were established. The vacuum created by Boran departure from outlying livestock areas was partly filled by Somali pastoralists.

As a result Boran have effectively lost a significant portion of the best wet season grazing land, and are increasingly squeezed against the river. Government has done little to arrest, let alone reverse, this process. Indeed, its interventions have only encouraged the process. Wherever Boran have congregated because of poverty there have followed shops, primary schools, dispensaries and police posts creating permanent settlements and, eventually, small towns. The result is deforestation along the river, and the extension of the desert margin into once important dry season grazing areas.

The Lorian Swamp, for example, which begins some 25 km downstream of Merti, now supports a permanent population of pastoralists. At Iresa Boru, on the southern edge of the swamp, there is now a primary school, shops and a medical dispensary. Around the centre, extending upwards of 6—7 km, there is a dense concentration of settlements. In the last ten years or so most of the trees have been cut down for the fencing of cattle and small stock enclosures. In the dry season the area is windswept and dusty, and increasingly takes on the appearance of a true desert.

Iresa Boru is a poor man's grazing area, a kind of pastoralists' slum, where few stockowners own more than ten to twenty cattle and where the majority of people have sons, brothers or husbands in wage labour. Considering the scarcity of stock and the generally meagre supply of milk, even in the wet season, their adaptation to impoverishment is skilful. But the condition of the herd and flocks cannot be permanently jeopardized, for a decline in the quality of the stock leads to a fall in milk yields and herd fertility, and all stockowners recognize that permanent swamp grazing leads to a high incidence of trypanosomiasis and riverfluke. They also recognize that the swamp is not inexhaustible, and that there are dangers of overgrazing as the swamp becomes increasingly congested with stock.

Yet many of the pastoralists who live around Iresa Boru cannot afford to move away. Many of the young and middle-aged men are away in wage labour in distant towns, and the children at school, so the swamp provides easy watering and grazing for the few who remain at home to herd the cattle and small stock. In addition, maize meal bought from the nearby shops provides a much needed supplement to their diet. The richer pastoralists prefer to stay away from the swamp in the wet season but the poorer ones depend on it all the year round. They are trapped by their relative poverty and when the swamp dries up, as it did in 1980, they are usually the last to move away.

By the commonly accepted indices of development, such as the number of hospitals and schools built and irrigation schemes established, there has been considerable progress

in Isiolo District since Independence. Garba Tulla nowadays even boasts a direct telephone link to Nairobi. Yet this infrastructural development is not reflected in increased food security and self-sufficiency.

CONCLUSIONS

Boran pastoralists have suffered considerable economic dislocation in recent years — since the end of *Shifita* there have been three major droughts, 1970—1973, 1975—1976, 1979—1980. While they have suffered dislocation in the past as a result of drought and disease, recent food crises have come at a time of increasing government intervention. Government is now concerned to extend not only the benefits but the duties of citizenship to all Kenyans. The pastoral tribes of the north are no exception.

During the colonial period the pace of change in Isiolo District appeared to be slow. The administration was content to allow Boran to continue their nomadic pastoral way of life with minimal exactions and economic development in the north was restricted by government edict. Only towards the end of the colonial period, and during World War II, did administration allow Boran to become fully exposed to the market. By the end of the period money was widely circulated, but, except for a few wealthy Boran, most were still largely contained within their subsistence economy.

The impact of *Shifita* on Boran life was wide ranging, especially as it coincided with the beginning of a new independent Kenyan administration, which was intent on tying the underdeveloped north of the country more closely to the developed south. The destruction of their herds and flocks left Boran involved in the developing market economy.

Boran responses to *Shifita* and the later droughts were similar to their responses to previous disasters, namely, they looked for alternative and temporary means to make ends meet while they re-built their herds and flocks. Some destitutes were adsorbed among neighbouring tribes, and many left the district to look for work in the large towns and cities of Kenya. Others were able to secure a place at the irrigation schemes established by government and relief agencies.

Sedentarization was a consequence of impoverishment and government policy, as people settled near to permanent water, shops, schools and irrigation schemes. As a result of this permanent settlement along the Ewaso River there has been deforestation and land degradation. The long term effects of this uncontrolled destruction of riverine forest have been increased rates of evapo-transpiration, less water in the river, increasingly saline farm plots, and the creation of localized dustbowls.

Farming along the Ewazo has proved no more intrinsically stable or productive a regime than pastoralism. Most of the schemes that were established after *Shifita* and the droughts in the early seventies have since collapsed, largely because of mismanagement, poor design and organization, and lack of funds.

Livestock continue to be vital to Boran sense of security. Livestock not only reproduce but provide their owners with a shield against the market and government. To Boran, livestock represent freedom from government control.

No matter how skilful the Boran adaptation to impoverishment they are trapped in a vicious spiral of poverty and decline. Escape is increasingly difficult. The wealthy tend to monopolise all the well paid jobs in the district, and the poor, because of lack of education and connections, are pushed "down-country" as watchmen and stockmen. While wealthy wage earners can use part of their incomes to buy livestock, poor wage earners are hard-put even to keep the livestock they have.

Increasing economic inequality means the poor find it difficult to improve their economic standing. Not only do they get the worst jobs but they live in the worst grazing areas, and their stock are the first to suffer in any drought. Wealthy wage-earners and shopkeepers, who are less dependent on their livestock for daily subsistence than the poor, hire herders to look after their stock at stock camp. Poor men, who may already have their household resources stretched to the limit, may have no one to take their stock to camp, and can less easily afford to live without their stock nearby. They are therefore much more vulnerable to local rainfall failure and over-grazing, and respond less quickly to climatic fluctuations than wealthy stockowners.

In conditions where the rangeland is limited and deteriorating as a result of permanent settlement in dry season grazing areas, the long term prospects for economic recovery are poor. As Boran increasingly rely on food bought from shops and/or farm produce, and still continue

to try to build up their herds through direct investment and to maintain low offtake rates, pressure on grazing lands will steadily increase. The likely result is a long-term decline in livestock productivity and increased vulnerability to drought.

But it is the poor who mainly suffer from this decline in carrying capacity, so they are steadily thrust into ever increasing dependence on shops, migrant labour, and trade, all factors which increase their vulnerability to market fluctuations and government. They are reduced to the status of marginals, dependent on a national economy and polity for survival. As a result Boran are increasingly becoming a population of permanent paupers dependent on food relief and outside agencies.

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