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Interviewer: As I mentioned earlier, I will be asking questions about water, health mostly focusing on diarrhea, but also other illnesses and about food. Let’s begin with this: I have seen this sack from PACIDA. Do you know these PACIDA people? Did you buy it, or was it supplied to you by them?

Respondent: Yes, I know them. They supplied it to us.

Interviewer: Do they bring supplies regularly or only occasionally?

Respondent: Mostly, we are given supplies during the drought.

Interviewer: Are you currently experiencing drought?

Respondent: Yes, we are, but it’s not that severe. From what we received last time during the drought, we just distributed it the other day in small portions so that everyone could get some.

Interviewer: How is it shared? Is there a written list, or are you just known to the PACIDA people?

Respondent: The names are written down first, and then food is given depending on the number of family members in each household.

Interviewer: After you are given food, do you share it with other family members?

Respondent: No, everyone receives their portion based on the number of people in their household. The amount of food given varies with that.

Interviewer: Is PACIDA the only organization that brings you food?

Respondent: On that day, it was only PACIDA that brought us food, but there are many organizations that bring food. We are listed as beneficiaries at different times.

Interviewer: What type of food do they bring?

Respondent: Sometimes we are brought mixed grounded food some of it looks like trees.

Interviewer: Are you asked about the kind of food you would want, or are you just given any food of their choice?

Respondent: We usually ask them to bring us food because we are starving and becoming weak, so they bring us that food.

Interviewer: When this relief food doesn’t come, where do you get food from?

Respondent: We don’t have anywhere else to get food from, but when the situation worsens, we go to places like North Horr to buy maize, beans, and wheat in small quantities just to sustain us during that time.

Interviewer: What about vegetables?

Respondent: We rarely see vegetables, maybe only when someone goes to town to buy after selling their goats that day.

Interviewer: Whose responsibility is it to look for food in a household?

Respondent: It’s my responsibility as a man to look for food for my family. The food that is needed for the household is my wife’s responsibility, and then I go and sell either the goat, cow, or camel to cater for that need,whether it is beans, rice, oil, sugar, or salt. I’m the one who goes to buy them after my wife gives me the list of what is needed.

Interviewer: Is it mandatory for women to cook?

Respondent: Yes, it is a must for women to cook.

Interviewer: What about girls?

Respondent: From around the age of ten, between fifteen and twenty, girls start helping their mothers with cooking until they get married at around twenty.

Interviewer: What about boys?

Respondent: The boys’ responsibilities are to build houses, look after the livestock, and draw water from the wells for the animals to drink. They don’t cook.

Interviewer: Are men also involved in fetching water for domestic use?

Respondent: Girls also fetch water by bringing donkeys to the water point and taking the water home. Men help by drawing water from the well, filling the jerrycans, and placing them on the backs of the donkey carriers. The girl or the mother then drives the donkeys back home.

Interviewer: Do men and women go together in this case?

Respondent: No, the man stays behind, and the mother or girl drives the donkeys home on her own.

Interviewer: Between the goats and the donkeys, which one do you use more often?

Respondent: Long ago, we used camels, but now we use donkeys.

Interviewer: Why do you use donkeys these days? Why the change?

Respondent: Because it is easier to manage donkeys. You can just let them graze on their own without much effort, unlike camels which need to be looked after and driven back in the evening.

Interviewer: Aren’t you afraid that the donkeys might be stolen?

Respondent: No, they can’t be stolen.

Interviewer: Where do you get the water from?

Respondent: Do you know the big bridge near the water stream in the direction of North Horr? We dig there to get water for domestic use.

Interviewer: When you dig there for water, how deep do you go before you find water?

Respondent: Approximately 9 to 12 meters deep. It’s the men’s responsibility to do that. The water is not salty; it’s very good for consumption and tastes like rainwater.

Interviewer: When it rains, does the water get dirty?

Respondent: Yes, it gets contaminated, and every time it rains, we have to dig again to get clean water.

Interviewer: Is it that floods fill the hole, or does the water itself get contaminated?

Respondent: Yes, it gets dirty.

Interviewer: Who plans to dig those holes to get water? Does every household have its own water hole?

Respondent: It’s the men. Not every household has its own hole. For instance, this village has 222 households, and there are only two water holes. The men come together to dig for water during drought.

Interviewer: I heard that the Borana have a system called Abaherega and Aba Dethaa. Do you also have such a system?

Respondent: Yes, we also have the Erega system for cows and goats, but not for camels. Our system is the same as that of the Borana.

Interviewer: Who do you think in this village can be an Abaherega?

Respondent: Someone like Busu Adhele. He is the Abaherega of Ell Saku Balla.

Interviewer: What is his role as Abaherega?

Respondent: He mobilizes people when there is drought and there is a need to dig a well so that people can access drinking water.

(Diba corrects him): It’s the elders who first mobilize the people and identify the place to dig. Then Busu Adhele organizes how the water will be used.

(Interviewee agrees)

Interviewer: So Busu Adhele is the one who manages the place?

Respondent: Yes, he is the one, but when he migrates with his goats to another place, the elders appoint someone else to manage it.

Interviewer: What criteria are used to choose the Abaherega?

Respondent: They choose an energetic man who can handle the responsibility, someone sharp. It’s not necessary that the person has gone to school, but he must be honest—and it must be a man.

Interviewer: Why is that the case? Is there a law that enforces this?

Respondent: In Gabra culture, we say women are like children and can forget their roles. If we give children that kind of responsibility, we will be the ones to suffer. But if a man forgets his role, it will bring serious consequences.

Interviewer: If someone lets their animals drink from the well without following the order of the Abaherega and ends up dirtying the water, what happens?

Respondent: That would be a big mistake. As punishment, his goats or cows would be slaughtered. He would have disappointed the whole Gabra community and shown great disrespect to the elders who set the rules.

Interviewer: What are the specific roles of the Abaherega?

Respondent: It’s mainly the general management of the animals with regard to water. He confirms the number of herds and which specific herd should drink on a certain day. He also oversees the cleaning of manure or any other necessary cleaning, although the elders are in charge of that. The Abaherega also ensures that the animals scheduled to drink on that particular day do so without delay, preventing any from being pushed to the next day. He ensures that herds traveling to far places are prioritized so they can drink early and return home on time.

Interviewer: Is there any payment made to him for allowing goats or camels to drink water?

Respondent: No, there is no payment for the water. However, there is a fine if someone fails to clean up the dung left by their animals. For example, the fine could be a big bull from that person’s cows or a fat and large male goat.

Interviewer: And is that fine animal slaughtered or given to someone else?

Respondent: It is sold, and the money is used to buy food for the elders of the erega. Any remaining amount is used to repair the well. You know, it’s the Abaherega who identifies who made the place dirty and left without cleaning. People will then ask him what action he took against the person who violated the erega law. The Abaherega also takes care of the water troughs, ensuring they are not broken.

Interviewer: Who built the hand pumps for you?

Respondent: We dug the well ourselves. We, the elders from this area, came together and decided to dig it because we realized the water from the open well was not good for human consumption, though it was okay for cooking and cleaning. So we requested assistance from different projects like PACIDA, Solidarity, and MIDIA to help us build it. There are three hand pump wells: one belongs to the school, another to the women’s group, and the third to the mosque. They don’t belong to any individual; we all use water from them communally. When cleaning is needed, like now with the women’s group pump, we all take part.

Interviewer: Does the Abaherega also manage the hand pump wells?

Respondent: No. The Abaherega only manages the open wells where livestock drink from.

Interviewer: You mentioned the water at the hand pump wells isn’t good?

Respondent: Yes, it’s not good because it is salty.

Interviewer: Was the water ever tested?

Respondent: Yes, it was tested. The MIDIA project took samples for testing, but we never received feedback from the results.

Interviewer: Have you ever seen people drink the salty water? What happened to them after?

Respondent: In the past, we didn’t care much about water quality. Even in places like North Horr, we used to drink salty water. But starting around 1978 until now, we’ve started to understand the effects of salty water. For instance, the water from the hand-pumped wells for the women’s group and the school, which people now say is very salty,we used to drink and even cook with it. Now people complain about stomach aches, burning sensations in the throat, pain during urination, pain in the testicles, and some even urinate blood. They also report a burning sensation in the stomach.

Interviewer: What about discoloration of the teeth?

Respondent: I don’t think salty water causes that. People just need to brush their teeth properly.

Interviewer: Do you make your own toothbrush or chewing stick? Is there a specific tree used to make them?

Respondent: There are several trees we use to make toothbrushes, such as Athe, Hamess, Rigga Qero, Agagaro, Rigga Qero, and Gabbe.

Interviewer: What are the other problems related to water quality?

Respondent: Before the drought, we used to have large herds of cattle. But when drought strikes, the quantity of water decreases from enough to support 1,200 animals to only 700. During severe droughts, water may become completely unavailable. (Note: unclear section from 36:40 to 36:50)

Interviewer: Can you remember which year had such a bad drought?

Respondent: It was in 2023, when we lost many of our livestock.

Interviewer: After the drought destroys the animals, do you still try to keep large herds?

Respondent: After the drought, we try to dig more wells to sustain our animals. If we still can’t find enough water in this area, we migrate with the animals to other places with water and pasture.

Interviewer: When you migrate with the animals, does the whole village or household go together? And does it happen often?

Respondent: For example, among my goats, some go to Fora, but those kept for milk stay at home. The whole household doesn’t migrate.

Interviewer: But in the past, did people migrate with all their livestock?

Respondent: Yes, in the past we migrated with the animals, even with our children. We would even carry our houses on the backs of camels and move to other places.

Interviewer: What changed that made people stop doing that?

Respondent: The droughts have become extremely severe, and people feel exhausted and desperate due to thirst. Also, children now go to school and need to stay in one place. When we try to ask relatives or people we know in town to host the kids, they are often unwilling. The government is also strict about school attendance. As parents, when we see other people’s children going to school, we want the same for our kids so they’re not left behind. That’s why we now choose to stay instead of migrating.

Interviewer: When was the school here built?

Respondent: It was built in 2007.

Interviewer: In your opinion, what are some of the changes you’ve observed now that your settlement is permanent, compared to when it was temporary and you were migrating from one place to another?

Respondent: I believe life was better when we were migrating. Now, for example, my camels only know this area they don’t explore other places. Their shed stays in one spot, collecting dirt. Even when it’s cleaned, the dirt builds up and causes disease. But in the past, we would migrate when the rains came, all the way to Kalacha and Hurri Hills. In those cases, there was no buildup of dirt, the animals fed on fresh pasture, and they didn’t get sick. Livestock that stay in one place without migrating often produce meat that causes illness in people. Their milk is also weak and lacks good taste.

In 1979, a white doctor came here during the Farm Africa period, in a place called Elgade. About 17 people were bitten by mosquitoes and died. That white woman doctor said that if it weren’t for the soil and grass in this place, everyone would have perished. She said the soil is strong and clean, and the grass that grows here is good. Since the animals eat this grass, their milk keeps the people strong. That’s why they didn’t die from the mosquito bites. She stayed among the rocks and had left her helicopter in North Horr. Our doctor then was called Sister Elizabeth, a missionary. So we’ve seen and heard a lot with our own eyes.

Doctor Elizabeth even took samples of our soil and grass to Nairobi for research. She said the Gabra people have strong bodies and don’t easily fall sick from minor illnesses, because they feed on milk and meat from animals that eat grass grown in this rich soil. But nowadays, unlike in those times, children and women constantly suffer from flu. They can’t go a week without falling ill. Men also cough a lot. In the past, a person could walk 70 kilometers in a day without getting tired. Now, even men in their 30s and 40s complain of back and knee pain, and they struggle to get proper sleep. All this is because we now stay in one place and don’t move around like we used to.

Interviewer: Do you receive relief food?

Respondent: Yes, we receive small portions. But that food is genetically modified (GMO), and it’s full of chemicals that were used to force it to grow. The food I eat now, you wouldn’t be able to eat it would make you sick. Even my children can’t eat the food I used to eat, because their bodies are weak.

In the past, after childbirth, women would drink blood for a whole week, followed by sheep tallow the next week, and roasted meat the week after. If a woman refused to drink the blood or eat the tallow, her husband might beat her for refusing to care for what he considers his property. After following this regimen for seven days, the women would emerge from seclusion glowing and looking attractive. But nowadays, when women give birth, they often fall sick instead.

Interviewer: Apart from coughing and flu, what other diseases are common here?

Respondent: When you keep moving from one place to another, your body becomes stronger and you eat better. When people stop moving, they fall sick. In the past, the Gabra people moved a lot, and through migration, we interacted with other Gabra communities from different areas. Now, we don’t socialize like before.

Interviewer: Are there people in other areas who still move around with their animals?

Respondent: Not really,maybe just going to Fora and then coming back.

Interviewer: When it comes to health, is diarrhea a problem in this area?

Respondent: Yes, it is. People go to the hospital often, and the children are always sick.

Interviewer: Does diarrhea occur mostly during the rainy season or at other times?

Respondent: It happens mostly during droughts. Floods from the rainy season bring dirt, which gets stuck in certain areas. When people drink water contaminated by this dirt, they get sick. That’s our opinion, thoughnot based on scientific research.

Interviewer: Are the latrines used once they are built?

Respondent: Yes, they are used. But very few people have latrines, so when one person builds one, it fills up quickly. As you can see, there are only two latrines here.

Interviewer: What do you do to prevent diarrhea?

Respondent: We have nothing to prevent it, because there’s no medicine. Even when someone gets sick, they just suffer here. Many people have died from diarrhea. If you go to the hospital in Marsabit, you’re usually sent to buy medicine at a chemist because the hospital has no medicine. And not everyone can travel all the way to Marsabit. Some people who own livestock still don’t sell any to help themselves, simply because they lack knowledge. So their condition gets worse.

And people don’t say someone died from diseases like diarrhea or malaria. They just say, “The person died.”

Interviewer: Does the government come here, and do they help you?

Respondent: The only people who come are those two young men you arrived with this morning. They don’t go out into the field they just move along the road and leave.

Interviewer: Does the government impose any laws that restrict you in any way?

Respondent: In the past, the government used to call people from every area for meetings, but nowadays, they don’t. Even the chiefs are not doing their work like before. Since 2007, the chief has only held three barazas (public meetings) here. I haven’t seen any barazas since then.

Interviewer: So even if someone is killed, the issue is solved among yourselves and the government is not involved?

Respondent: Yes. For example, just yesterday in Marsabit, a Burji boy was killed, and also a Gabra was killed in Dukana. The government has done nothing about either case.

Interviewer: What about the county government?

Respondent: They do nothing either. Just look at our road it’s in terrible condition. Everything else is just as bad.

Interviewer: Let’s move to the next part of our interview, which involves a net mapping exercise. I’d like you to describe how you perceive life here. For example, when it rains, there’s grass, the animals feed well, and they become healthy, which in turn improves human health through meat and milk consumption. We’ll use a scale from 1 to 10 to show how strong, moderate, or weak those relationships are.

Respondent: We’ve stayed in this place for a very long time. The other day, it rained, but because all the animals are kept in one place, the land has degraded. The land is no longer productive.

Interpreter: Yes, the rain did come recently and was heavy, but because people stay in one place, the grass doesn’t grow anymore.

Interviewer: So, from what you’re telling me, staying in one place (being sedentary) causes vegetation loss. So the relationship between being sedentary and vegetation would be negative. If people weren’t stationary, grass would grow when it rains. How would you rate that relationship, on a scale from 1 to 10?

Respondent: I would rate it between 7 and 8 for the negative impact of being sedentary.

Interviewer: When it rains, what kind of grass grows?

Respondent: Good, high-quality grass doesn’t grow anymore. Instead, weeds grow—types we don’t even know the names of.

Interviewer: When animals feed on those poor-quality grasses, do they benefit?

Respondent: At least the animals won’t die of hunger, but those grasses don’t have any nutritional value. I would rate that relationship at 2 out of 10.

Interviewer: And when the animals feed on high-quality grass?

Respondent: They become very healthy and look good. I’d rate that at 10 out of 10. For example, when goats eat good grass, by 10:00 a.m., they’re already full and sleeping. But if they eat poor grass, they walk around all day still looking for food.

Interviewer: How does the water the animals drink affect their health? For example, does salty water help or harm them?

Respondent: Long ago, when goats drank water, they could go five days without drinking again. Camels could go 18 days without water. But now, that’s not possible. Camels can only manage 8 days without water. It’s because we stay in one place and the animals are getting weak.

Interviewer: So does a dirty environment make the animals drink water more often?

Respondent: Yes. I remember back in 1971, I took my camels far away to drink water, and we were away for 18 days. Even I didn’t drink water during that time I survived on blood and milk. Both the camels and I were strong. But now, the dirty environment makes both people and animals weak. I’d rate that relationship at 5.

Interviewer: Apart from staying in one place, what else makes people physically weak?

Respondent: There are two major things causing suffering. First is insecurity. People get into conflicts, and the government does nothing about it. The attackers are heavily armed. This insecurity affects animal movement everyone moves in different directions trying to avoid raids. Grazing areas are located near rival communities, so there’s constant danger.

Interviewer: How does this affect human health?

Respondent: Conflict limits people’s movement. Because the animals don’t move freely, their meat and milk production drops. If herders migrate, they all go to one supposedly safe area instead of spreading out, so they overcrowd that area. Also, if I move, I have children in school who will I leave them with? Boarding schools are too expensive.

Interviewer: Does fetching water from wells have any health benefits? And what about drinking dirty water?

Respondent: All the water is the same. Water from Thololo, for example, gets contaminated by surface runoff that carries feces and other waste into it. That brings diseases like cholera, diarrhea, flu, and also increases mosquitoes.

Interviewer: Do you think all this is happening because people’s bodies are weak?

Respondent: Yes. And the main reason is that we’ve stopped moving we stay in one place.

Interviewer: Since this hand-pump well was built, what does it mean for this whole system?

Respondent: It was built to prevent dirt from getting into the well, but the water is still salty.