"Kenya Boran Revisited."
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Africa

by Norman N. Miller
[NNM-3-'79]

Kenya Boran Revisited

"It is silent now...only a place for lions and hyena to sleep. The people have gone...only God knows where."

Editor's Note: The author returned to northern Kenya in early 1979 to learn what changes had occurred among the Boran and what had happened to the people filmed on the 1972 documentary film expedition. With filmmakers James Blue and David MacDougall the author produced the five *Faces of Change* films on Kenya and the monographs that accompany them.

Film Personalities

Peter Boru . . . . . schoolboy
Guyo Ali. . . . . father of Peter Boru
Dokata Iya . . . . . herdsboy
Iya Duba. . . . . father of Dokata Iya
Chief Jillo . . . . . local village chief
Orge Adi. . . . . grandmother, sister of Chief Jillo
Rungu Ali. . . . . Peter Boru's mother
Stephen Godana . . . . . Peter's school friend
Wako Diriba. . . . . Village Elder

The Films

Kenya Boran, I, II, Boran Herdsman, Boran Women, Harambee (*Pull Together*), and *Women in a Changing World* (one quarter on Kenya).

Distributor: Wheelock Educational Resources, P.O. Box 451, Hanover, NH 03755 (603) 448-3924.

Peter Boru was standing on a jagged rock overlooking the valley where we had filmed together in 1972. The Boran village with its 18 huts, the cattle corrals, and the meandering animal trails had all disappeared. Only dark patches of grass suggested where corrals had once been inundated with cattle manure, and even to see these one had to know exactly where to look. The house sites were totally gone. The entire dusty village I remembered had vanished.

"Yes, it is silent now," I agreed.

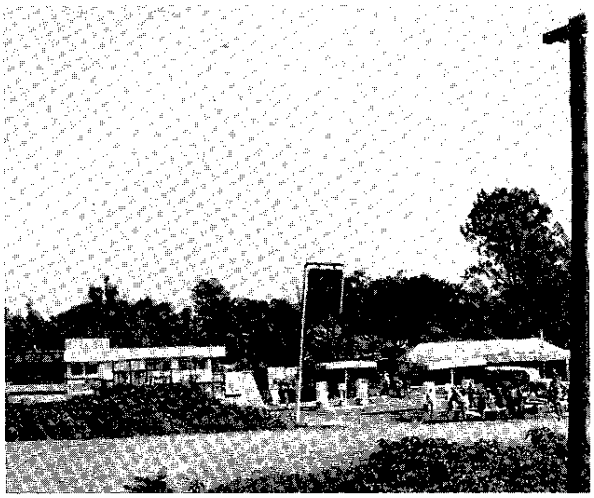
We were both to be proven wrong within the week.

* * * * *

I returned to the Marsabit area of northern Kenya to find the Boran experiencing their version of heaven. The recent rains had been exceptionally plentiful. Fat cattle were belly deep in the lush, tall grass, and there was an abundance of milk and cream and even a bit of honey.

The five previous drought years, however, had taken their toll. Several elders we knew had died, several mothers had lost babies, and many people had been reduced to abject poverty. Violence and cattle raiding had increased throughout the drought and then, quixotically, the rains that had brought the lush grass had also caused outbreaks of malaria, pneumonia, and bronchial infections.

Changes in Marsabit town since we filmed there in 1972 had also been dramatic. It was now more of a market center and district administrative capital. Electricity had been brought in and the town now had lights. Three new cement buildings marked the beginnings of a new town



Marsabit town.

plan and market center. More people had settled in the area, creating a rambling shanty village on one side of town and causing new farm settlements to spring up around the mountain. The town itself had become more important as a market center, and the police post had been expanded for greater security. The war between Ethiopia and Somalia had created many problems. Refugees were in the area, welfare cases were on the town dole, banditry continued, and poaching and smuggling were ongoing. The local hospital staff were exceptionally concerned about prostitution in the town, and the new makeshift *hotelis*, as a new and virulent strain of gonorrhea seemed to be taking on epidemic proportions. An overall population build-up had occurred; there were now some 9,500 people in the town and another 3,500 settled around the mountain. Both groups gave the water and public health officials nightmares. If the rains stopped for any length of time, as they had in the drought of 1972-1978, the only solution would be to bring in water from a spring 40 miles away by tanker truck (see boxed insert on Drought and the Desert).

Other contrasts became quickly apparent. All senior government officers had changed since 1972, and none were native to the area. A punishment post atmosphere prevailed and the "down country" Kenyans were anxious to serve their time and be transferred. The tourist business in Marsabit National Park, which encircles the higher forest areas of the mountain, had declined. Ahmed, the huge elephant protected by Presidential Decree, had died, and poaching had cut the game-viewing possibilities to a minimum. The new lodge in the park was nearly empty and the safari tent camp had been closed. The European doctor at the hospital had been replaced by a Ugandan doctor; the Protestant (English Anglican) missionaries had been replaced by Protestant African missionaries. The Catholica White Fathers, some four or five from Italy, carried on their work, although the technical school they ran had been closed for months in a dispute with the educational authorities. Transportation activities had expanded, the dirt strip airport had been lengthened and paved, largely for security reasons, and a new Shell station was now competing with the Caltex pump. Neither had gas regularly.

At the same time, many facets of life in Marsabit had not changed at all. I was able to find many of the key people we had worked with in the film, and as if by magic or at least serendipity, the village we had filmed. The site, abandoned for seven years, was resettled while I was there by the same seminomadic Boran we had known before. Peter Boru made certain we were there to witness the event.

But this was all to come. The story really begins in my search for Peter Boru, for Peter was more than just an ordinary schoolboy. He typified the transitional lifestyle, a young man with one foot still in the traditional world but moving rapidly in modern directions.

* * * * *

Of Drought and the Desert

Marsabit town and the surrounding Boran settlements are on a mountainous upland, between 2,000-3,000 feet above the desert. It is a rolling, grassy highland some 50 miles across, crowned by a heavy forest. The town itself has the character of a hill station surrounded by the rugged pink-brown desert.

The awesome presence of the desert pervades everything. Silences are broken only by the wind, movements of men and animals are slow and people have a tendency to stand and simply stare into the distance. Typically a dawn mist hangs over the town until mid-morning followed by a sleepy, tepid afternoon until the warm gentle breeze comes up from the desert floor to usher in the evening. The cool air and the clear, gray stars come together.

The desert is also why the Boran can look upon drought and its terrible consequences as a part of the natural order of things. Although the Boran experience severe dryness at least every decade, the drought of 1972-1978 was the worst in living memory. Untold death and suffering occurred and the loss of cattle and property was enormous. The area was reduced to a welfare state by the end of 1974, particularly after the people had eaten their seeds and had nothing to plant. Seventy percent of the cattle perished, and 3,000 camels were counted dead around the mountain. The government and the missionaries were essentially the sole providers.

Curiously, and tragically, situations like this seem never to be really overcome, and may indeed worsen. Even when the rains do come, and food is plentiful, children may already have been stunted for life by prolonged malnutrition. For the entire population the seeds of future calamities have been sown by their own responses to the drought. This can be particularly perilous in a fragile ecosystem like Marsabit mountain, where the water and grass are severely limited. A downward spiral of events degrades the area for human settlement. The 1972-1978 scenario has evolved roughly as follows:

-- To avoid starvation people came to Marsabit town for food, refugee camps sprang up, and new semipermanent settlements emerged from the nomadic population. The availability of welfare food created an instantaneous population boom.

-- When the rains did come, they also brought malaria, TB, and other infections to an already weakened population.

-- Contamination of water supplies occurred when surface water run-offs went through garbage heaps and open sewer trenches. Sanitation in the market became worse, as fly-borne diseases, combined with wandering animal vectors such as pigs and dogs, caused enormously increased illness.

-- In response to the drought conditions, the government brought in more administrative assistance, more police, and more staff for the new power plant and airport construction.

-- To accommodate the new population a vast shantytown area sprang up on the edge of town. It was called "Shauri Yako" ("Your Headache").

-- To get the small, strong wood to build the mud-wattle walls for the shantytown, Shauri Yako inhabitants paid good prices for fresh saplings. Forest poaching began in earnest, destroying the young growth that is most essential for forest replenishment.

The result: without the forest as an effective rain catchment, water supplies will begin to dwindle, and forced abandonment of the town is only a matter of time.

The ravages of the drought.

Peter Boru with copy of film series background essay.

Nearly seven years after we had met and four years since I had seen him last, I found Peter Boru on a grass-lined track near his father's village. I had driven out from Marsabit Town with a Forestry Department driver looking for "teacher Boru," as he is now called. The Land Rover groaned over the ruts in the road and then slowed to a crawl as the track turned gradually into a narrow cowpath. As we were about to get out and start walking, Peter suddenly came bounding toward us. He had heard the engine and come from his house to see who the visitors were. He had had no idea I was even in Kenya. The Land Rover ground to a halt and I climbed out. Peter stopped in his tracks, looking in wide-eyed amazement. Then with a broad smile he threw his arms up in the air in a marvelous soccer-field salute.

"My god... my god!" he exclaimed. "I was just coming to ask for a ride to town and I find you here! My god! What do you think of that?"

We laughed and slapped hands, looking at each other intently. Then spontaneously, the three of us, including the bewildered Forestry Department driver, shook hands all around.

The boy had become a man. He was stockier, slightly taller, and fuller in the shoulders. His arms were thicker, his hands bigger, and his grip had a hint of playful *macho* in it. A wisp of a goatee decorated his chin, and his hair was now a little longer and fuller. Otherwise Peter Boru was as I had remembered him. His easy smile and winsome laughter were still there. He still talked with animated expression, like a natural actor, the contours of his face changing as he gestured.

It was an exciting moment. We immediately sat down on the hood of the Land Rover and started to talk. The driver went off to sleep behind the steering wheel, and I began to hear the most recent chapters in the life of Peter Boru.

Now 22 years old, he was a primary school-teacher in nearby St. Peter's school. The school was still on Christmas vacation and he was at home tending his garden and lounging with his family. His father, Guyo Ali, was in good health, although no longer the local assistant chief since Chief Jillo had retired. Both Guyo Ali and Peter's mother, Rungu, had survived the drought, although they had been forced to sell their cattle and eat the seeds they had kept for planting. The three younger sisters and two older relatives who had lost everything in the drought were now living with the family. Peter's school salary of 900 shillings a month ($120) was supporting all eight of the family.

Peter recounted events of the intervening four years. His teacher-training college at Meru on the slopes of Mt. Kenya had been very difficult. Many of his classmates had failed, and he had had a struggle to finish. His high marks in practice teaching in a nearby primary school had stood him in good stead and led to his final graduation. In fact, he became something of a celebrity in the school as the first Boran instructor the agricultural Meru children had ever seen.

After graduation his first posting had been to Loglogo, a desert station some 30 miles south of Marsabit. It had been exceedingly hot and it was Rendille country, the old foes of the Boran.

Nevertheless, Peter had settled in well, done a good job, and at the end of the first year received both the high proficiency report and the transfer to Marsabit he had wanted.

"Let's go over to my school," Peter suddenly exclaimed, jumping off the hood of the Land Rover so abruptly he woke the driver. "It's only four kilometers. I'll show you my house and my classroom."

We bounced off across the grassland to St. Peter's Primary School. (The name, Peter assured me, had nothing to do with him. It was a government school, originally started by the British Anglican mission.) Peter's "house" was a one-room cubicle in a row of five cubicles known as junior staff housing. He had forgotten his key, so we couldn't go in, but we peered through the back window: bed, chair, table, mirror, pegboard for clothes, a few books, two bright tablecloths as bedspreads, a picture of Lake Tahoe, California on the wall, and a storage chest for his food and cooking pots.

"I have a man-servant," he said proudly. "A young boy does my cooking as I am too busy during school." He then apparently decided the word "man-servant" sounded too grand. "In fact, you know, it is more like this: four of the teachers share this helper and we each pay part of his wage."

We strolled toward the teaching area and went into one of the open classrooms. Peter sat down at a student desk and began to tick off on his fingers the finer points of a teacher's life:

- The basic pay was now 705 shillings a month, plus 201 shillings for a hardship posting, a minor allowance for travel, a "disturbance" (relocation) allowance, and housing. But since he was provided quarters he didn't get the housing allowance. That made the wages come to 916 shillings ($120) a month, and he expected an increase of about 20 shillings ($3.00) a month at the end of each successive year.

- As a grade P-3 instructor he was expected to teach six subjects: math, English, science, geography, history, and Swahili. His class day began with an 8:10-10:10 session followed by a recess and then more classes from 10:30 - 12:30. Lunch break was two hours long, then classes resumed from 2:30 - 3:20.

- Since it was not a boarding school, students usually left after classes, although Peter was coaching soccer and volleyball and serving as choirmaster for those who lived nearby and could remain after school.

"Choirmaster!" I exclaimed, "You can't sing."

His eyes narrowed in mock fury. "You don't want to say that, you know. You don't want to say that at all! I am, in fact, a famous choirmaster, a very good singer, and even more!"

"What's more?" I prodded.

"A song-writer!" he shouted gleefully.

It was true. Peter had written a kind of ballad about the school and what improvements it needed, put it in a humorous context, taught it to the students, and won the Kenyatta Day Prize for the Primary School Singing Competition. He strolled proudly to his desk, waved the winner's certificate around in the air, and pounded his chest like a grand opera singer.

"Not only that," he continued, "in our song we asked for a water pipe for the school...so the students could wash properly...a cost of 7,000 shillings ($1,000). Because of the song, it has been granted! Yeah! Awarded! It will be built this year."

"Hurrah!" I shouted, clapping with him.

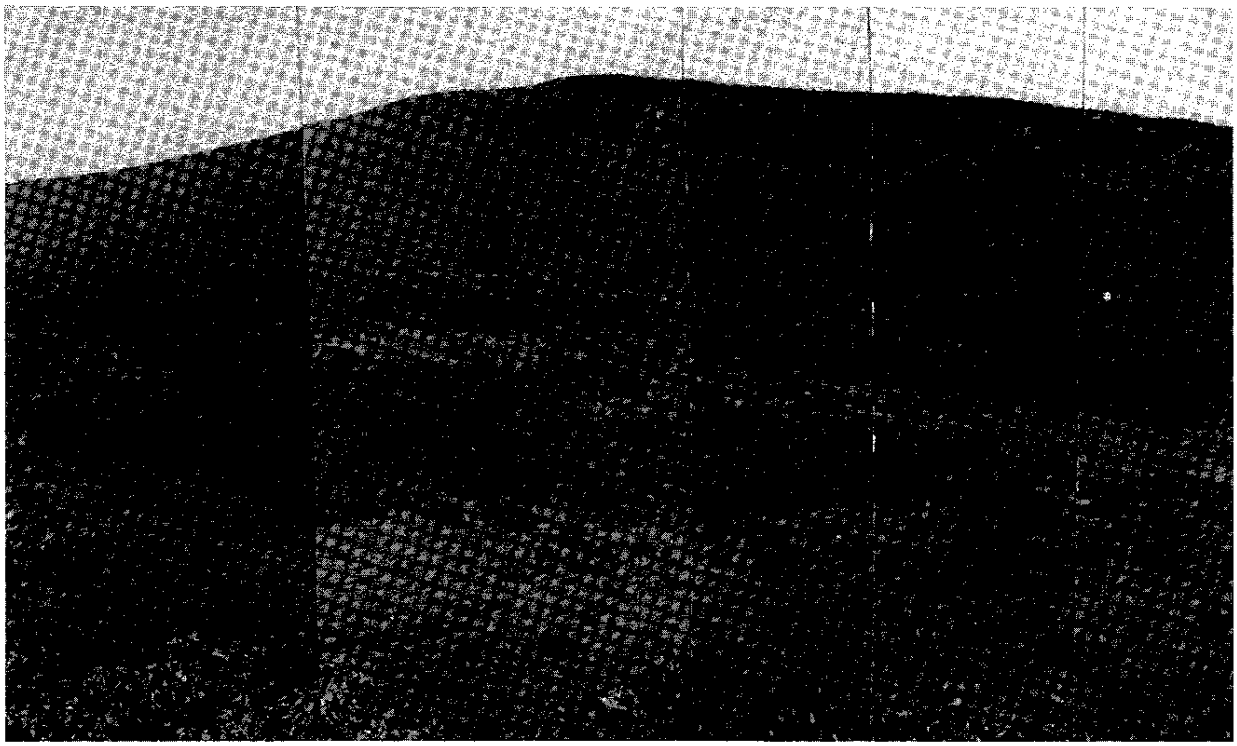
"Bravo!" Peter shouted, clapping with even greater enthusiasm. We laughed and started more hurrahs and bravos, clapping and shouting. The uproar brought the Forestry Department driver and two curious children to the classroom window, peering solemnly in through the blinding sunlight.

* * * * *

"Now we shall talk of love," announced Peter. "I am a doomed man. I will marry next year."

My last information, in 1975, was that Peter was betrothed to a seven-year-old girl and that his parents had made an economic contract with her family. She would have been about eleven by now.

"No, no," murmured Peter impatiently. "We cancelled out of that business. I have made my



PeterBoru overlooking the valley which in 1972 cradled a Boran village.

own choice...found her myself...chosen her myself, pursued her and won her. She is a perfect woman, beautiful, intelligent, very hard-working. Her name is Galebe."

I nodded in appreciation.

"And 17 years old," he said, anticipating my question. "But there are complications." His eyes narrowed, and this time in serious concern.

"The talks with her parents have not yet started. They know nothing. The negotiations will be hard. They will want a lot of cows...and cloth...and money. We may have to elope."

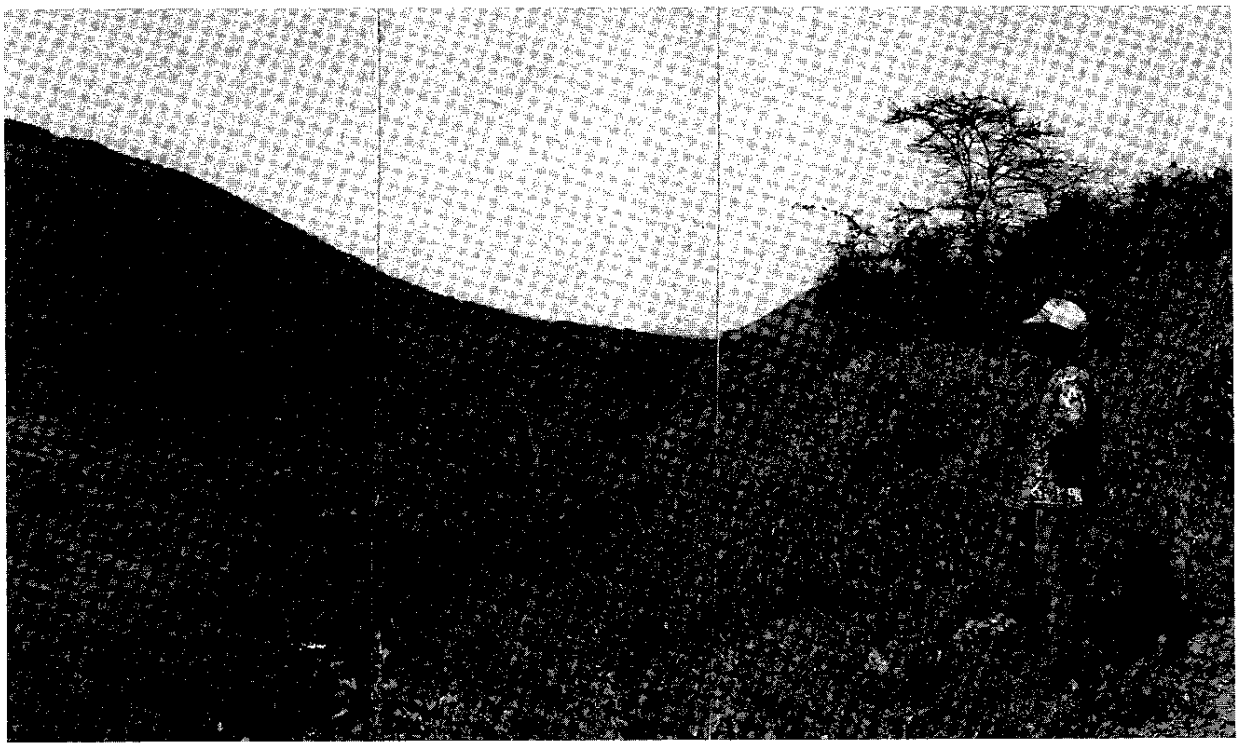
At this point I was sworn to secrecy about the whole matter. We agreed that if Peter could arrange it he would bring us all together for a brief meeting with Galebe, probably on the road, away from her village, only for a few minutes and perhaps a few photographs that he would give her later. That would be all.

In Peter's description, she was "statuesque, perfectly formed, a very intelligent Standard VII student who would pass her CPE exams with distinction for sure." He had known her since they were children; they had often met as they walked to and fro along the road. She was of the "Shamboli" (farming) people who had settled closer to Marsabit town and become more permanent farmers. She was Boran, but had some Burji relatives who had eased her family away from pastoralism and into farming.

Unfortunately I never met Galebe. The situation was too delicate. Peter at first suggested she was probably off on the Chalbi Desert visiting her uncle, but then confessed that his attempts to find her had failed. He didn't want to press his luck and have a highly visible European cause even greater problems with her parents.

"The trouble is this," he explained. "If I allow myself to be seen with her, and her parents learn of it, one of two things can happen. They could forbid us to meet because they want her to marry someone else, or they could demand such a high bride price I could never pay."

Peter went on to explain that as his own family interpreted Boran customs, he was allowed to choose his own wife if the negotiations could be worked out successfully. His other option was to elope, simply to run away with the girl with a



tacit understanding that the bride-price would be settled with her parents after the marriage. This too was a risky proposition, for there are stringent penalties in Borana for sexual activities with an unmarried girl. The elopement had to mean marriage. There had to be a tacit family understanding. It was one way to precipitate the necessary negotiations.

Peter expects to be asked to pay a "mixed" bride-price in the range of two or three cows, 600-800 shillings in cash ($84-$114), 10-20 cotton cloth segments and other gifts of food, tobacco, and coffee beans. The total cost we calculated to be something like $800, a sizable sum for a man making $120 a month who already supported a family of eight.

As we talked all the calculations were making Peter very sober. It was obviously going to be a major undertaking and there would be several difficult passages for him to negotiate. Then, as if to redouble his courage, he put one finger up as if to pontificate:

"I am seriously involved with this woman," he announced. "We will marry next year. That is for certain. You are invited to the wedding."

I started to express my thanks, but he interrupted.

"But there is one more thing," he said, now ready to explode in a laugh. "We have not budgeted for many children. It is much too expensive to feed and clothe them."

I fell into the trap. "O.K.," I said, "how many are in the budget?"

"Not more than eight!" he grinned.

* * * * *

In the next few days Peter Boru and I walked to the Boran villages around Marsabit mountain to find other people we had worked with in the filming, to show them the Boran film publications, to thank them for their past help, and to invite them to a formal *baraza* (celebration) when the publications and photographs would be presented to ex-chief Jillo.

We first returned to the old village site where we had filmed and where Peter, standing on a rock overlooking the abandoned site, gave me the news of some of the people we had known. One wing of the old village, under Iya Duba, the elder herdsman in the film, had trekked northduring

The author with young Boran herdsman.

the drought in search of grass in Ethiopia to save their emaciated cattle. Dokata, his son, the young herdboy had gone with him, then tragically had been conscripted into the Ethiopian military service. He had been sent to the Ogaden to fight in the recent Ethiopia-Somali war.

"Poor gentle Dokata," I lamented. "He was the least equipped to become a soldier."

"But he is not necessarily dead," Peter said hopefully. "We have not heard that he died, so we must assume he has survived."

Other reports from the north were sketchy, but it was known that Iya Duba had moved his camp back into Kenya and that he was now living in the Huri Hills some 200 miles northeast of Marsabit.

"We hear his cattle are doing well," continued Peter, "but Iya Duba himself is not strong. His chest pains him constantly, probably from TB, and he only rests at the camp. He no longer herds cattle."

Peter was then silent. I suspect we were both thinking of that marvelously independent, traditional man who had killed a lion and an enemy to prove his manhood, now living out his old age in the desolate dry grasslands of the Huri Hills. With luck he was finding comfort in his old age from his son, Dokata, the herdboy whose life had so contrasted to Peter's school-bound ways.

* * * * *

Chief Jillo, with Orge Ade nearby, examines the Faces of Change *collection of essays.*

Orge Adi, the grandmother who had given us the film soliloquy on why modern education was so important to the Boran, we found trudging along a cow path with an enormous water can strapped to her back. When she saw Peter and me coming toward her she stopped for a long moment, then laboriously unlashed her water can and carefully put it on the ground. She then came forward, her arms held out, trilling—that high-pitched, whistle-like greeting which signifies great events and great excitement. It was the full Boran welcome, ohing and ahing, touching each hand and arm, patting the chest, shoulders, arms, and head in a kind of verification that it is really you and that you are really here and really safe. If I had come from the moon it could not have been a more wondrous greeting.

Her news was good. She had survived the drought in good health. She still lived alone, but had built a new house a little closer to her brother, ex-chief Jillo. Her sons were well, one on the desert with the camels, the other Dida Adi, who had been in the film, now living in Wako Diriba's village with his cattle, 12 miles around the mountain.

We visited ex-chief Jillo the same day. He had retired as chief in 1974 when the full eclipse of the sun occurred. The Boran tradition of riding a chief out of the village on a donkey at the occurrence of any eclipse had been tempered in Jillo's case, and he had retired gracefully. He was still the only person with a tin-roofed house, and the

Left to Right: Peter, his mother Rungu, his father Guyo Ali, former chief Jillo Turkena, his wife, and Orge Adi, Jillo's sister.

whole area bore his name: "Jillo's Manyatta" (village) was the official dissemination point for all government communiqués. Jillo had recently been in the district clinic with astroenteritis and was not as ebullient and energetic as I remembered him. We sat on Boran stools in his compound as he looked over the film publications which had his picture in them.

"I'm just a herdsman now," he said, paradoxically looking out over his newly planted cornfield. Then, as if the contradiction became obvious to him, too, he added, "We still follow the herds, but we have begun to plant even more since the drought. We love the cattle, but need the maize," he said, putting the mountain-dwelling, transitional Boran neatly in a nutshell. Jillo's life was in fact a microcosm of the Boran in transition. As a traditional young man he went through the major life-cycle ceremonies. Then in his middle years he began to embrace more modern ways, becoming a government-appointed chief, working to convince others that farming and herding combined was a far safer lifestyle than total pastoralism. The transition had not been easy, particularly for Jillo, as his conversation reflected.

He looked at the field again, then shook his head. "Boran make poor farmers. We are herdsmen. It will take us generations to learn to plant."

* * * * *

The Boran gathering at Jillo's manyatta.

While we were talking with Jillo an invitation came to visit Peter's family the next day. That occasion turned out to be a full Boran ceremony, complete with great cups of milk, sugary tea, and wooden cups of rich cream. Times were good, although Peter's parents, Guyo Ali and Rungu, had also suffered greatly during the drought. They had moved their house closer to Jillo's *manyatta* and were living on Peter's salary, dependent mainly on a few cattle and goats and a small garden. Although Guyo Ali's job as honorary assistant chief had ended when Chief Jillo retired, he continued in his role as local mediator and spokesman in Swahili for the village. Peter's mother seemed unchanged, still shy and retiring, and seemingly bewildered by Peter's strange friendship with a European. Rungu did say that since her daughters were now in school she was free to pursue the more enjoyable, sociable work with the other women—carrying water and gathering firewood.

Conversation turned to Stephen Godana, Peter's school friend with whom he had studied while watching elephants in the film. Stephen had become a prison warden. He had passed his school exams with Peter, but not with enough distinction to enter secondary school. After some delay, during which he lounged around the town bumming cigarettes, he was offered a trainee's position in the prison service. He spent a few months in Marsabit, but was then posted to Kisumu, western Kenya, on Lake Victoria.

Wako Diriba, "father" of a Boran village since 1932.

"He's eating fish now," exclaimed Peter, "and liking it! How can you be a true Boran and eat fish? How can my friend Godana do that?"

* * * * *

When we met the next morning Peter was waving frantically. "We have been proven wrong!"

"We are never wrong," I tried to suggest, but Peter was already talking.

"Do you remember we stood and looked over the old village, the one that was abandoned... where we filmed...where Wako Diriba and Iya Duba had been the elders? They are coming back! Today! Today, to that very site. The very time you are here. It must be a miracle. It has been abandoned for seven years...and now they are coming back. We will go this evening. We must show Wako Diriba the books. We will go...no lions or hyena will sleep there now."

The people of Wako Diriba's village had been living some 13 miles away, on the outer fringe of the mountain, near the Sagante wells. When Peter and I arrived at the old site no signs of life were yet in evidence. The wind still rustled through the grass, and the valley was desolate. Then in the distance we began to hear faint cowbells, the lowing of cattle, and an occasional braying mule. Finally, the first cattle in a long, dusty caravan came into view. It had been a full day's trek for them, the younger men and boys moving the cattle, sheep, and goats, the women toiling with the mules that carried the household effects. Normally a Boran village would have had camels to help, but these were off grazing on the desert below.

To watch these people drift into the valley with their cattle and their total worldly possessions and begin to set up a new village was like watching a gigantic Durer painting suddenly come to life. In the center, high up the slope of the valley, sat Wako Diriba, the elder and "father of the village," still astride his mule. He sat quietly amidst a group of people struggling to set up his camp, to cut a small windbreak, to start a fire, and then to arrange Wako's four large stools. Only when all this was accomplished did the old man slowly climb down, unassisted, from his mule. He simply sat down on a large stool, blessed a pot of new milk, and began drinking the tea that was handed to him.

By contrast the rest of the area was in a frenzy of activity. Men were cutting brush and hurriedly building makeshift corrals. Some women helped in this work; others were building fires and unloading mules. No houses would be started that evening, only shelters against the wind. Eighteen or twenty campfires would keep predators at bay.

Everywhere there was a clanging and banging of pans, and a great deal of scuffling with unruly animals. The din was deafening. Then, drifting up the valley, came the lowing and mooing of the main herd, some 300 cows protesting their full udders, with more braying mules and barking dogs. Within a short time the people bringing in the cattle were also bent in feverish activity. Everyone worked against the time when the sun would set and the African curtain of darkness, which falls so quickly on the equator, would plunge their new village into blackness.

* * * * *

As Peter and I trudged by twilight back to the main road he talked of Boran life, obviously feeling replenished at being with the new village, probably feeling closer to his pastoral roots at that moment than he does at any time in his sedentary, school-teacher life.

"What will you do now?" asked Peter, knowing the next day I would leave to go south.

"Not much," I said, "perhaps write a few sentences about all of this...for the people who remember you in the films."

"Ah, good," said Peter. "Tell them to live like the Boran. Tell them to herd cows and have many children. Tell them not to be afraid to go where lions and hyena sleep."

(October 1979)