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Richard Hogg

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RE-STOCKING THE ISIOLO BORAN: AN APPROACH TO DESTITUTION AMONG PASTORALISTS

by Richard Hogg

Isiolo Boran suffered greatly during the Shifta conflict between Somalia and Kenya in the nineteen-sixties. Stock loss, which was caused through disease, lack of pasture, confiscation and shootings affected all species of stock, but was particularly severe among small stock and camels, which were especially vulnerable to disease caused by restricted mobility.¹ Between 1963 and 1970 the camel population declined by over 95 per cent from 200,000 to 6,000, the small stock population by over 90 per cent from 500,000 to 38,000, and the cattle population by about 7 per cent, from 150,000 to 140,000 (UNDP/FAO, 1971). After the cessation of hostilities there were three long periods of drought, 1970-73, 1975-76 and, most recently, 1979-81, which caused further losses. Between 1970 and 1979 the cattle population in the Boran area of Isiolo District declined by about 40 per cent.

The response of government and relief agencies to this massive destruction of livestock was to distribute famine relief and to establish small-scale irrigation schemes to provide a new way of life to destitute pastoralists. Indigenous responses were various: many Boran men went 'down-country' to look for work, others engaged in petty trade, and yet others attempted to farm (Hogg, 1980; Dahl 1979). This change in the local economy was reflected in a population shift from the pastoral areas to the urban centres, such as Garba Tulla, Merti and Mado Gashe, and to the Ewaso River, a dry season grazing area, where irrigation schemes and primary schools were established. The vacuum created by Boran departure from the outlying livestock areas was rapidly filled by Somali pastoralists moving in from Garissa and Wajir Districts (see Map 1).

The number of Boran settled at the irrigation schemes is relatively small. In 1979 out of a total population of 21,392 only some 4,000 (19 per cent) were farmers. The rest of the population either continue to live in pastoral areas (along the Ewaso), or live in the towns, including some of the irrigation schemes, which have become quasi-urban centres. The 'urban' Boran population probably accounts for some 40 per cent of the total. Many of those who live in the peri-urban villages which surround such towns as Garba Tulla, Merti and Mado Gashe eke out an existence in the 'informal' economy doing odd jobs about town, trading in miraa and/or firewood, making illicit beer, prostitution etc. Some manage to make a living, even to re-invest in small stock, others just survive.

Boran continue to be dependent on famine relief. After the latest drought in 1979-81 the Catholic Relief Service was feeding some 16,000 people in the District, and the German Freedom from Hunger Campaign (since the end of 1982 the World Food Programme) continue to supply food-for-work to some 800 families at the irrigation schemes along the Ewaso River. Irrigation agriculture, despite the large sums invested, has not proved the panacea hoped for by its planners.

When I last visited Malka Dakaa, Gafarsa and Merti schemes at the beginning of 1983 all the tenants, many of whom had taken up farming as long ago as 1974, were on famine relief. At Malka Dakaa and Merti schemes there is a record of chronic shortages of diesel to run the pumps, lack of money to buy spare parts, corruption and management incompetence. Nearly all the farm machinery has broken down, and over the last three years few farmers have managed to harvest anything from their plots. And all this at considerable cost. According to one

estimate (Kuester and Wiggins, 1982) the development costs (including food) run to about US \$17,000 per hectare. A massive sum even by the standards of large scale projects.

The strategy of trying to alleviate destitution among pastoralists through the establishment of expensive and bureaucratic agricultural settlement schemes must be seriously questioned (Hogg, 1983). While Boran, indeed pastoralists in general, have no in-built aversion to settling down nor to farming, if it is profitable, in Isiolo District irrigation agriculture has proved even riskier an enterprise than pastoralism, for which Boran have at least considerable aptitude, and which does allow them to control their own lives with minimal outside interference, and with a reasonable chance of economic success.

Throughout the years since Shifta Boran have, whenever they can, continued to invest in the pastoral sector, particularly in small stock which have the advantage of being relatively cheap to buy and of having a fast reproductive rate. Between 1970 and 1979 the small stock population in the District increased by over 800 per cent. Although this increase, from 27,000 in the Boran area of the District in 1970 to 226,000 in 1979, was not entirely due to natural reproduction and local investment strategies but also to an influx of Somali owned stock from outside the area, it is sufficiently large to indicate strongly Boran stock investment priorities and their continued faith in the pastoral sector.

At the irrigation schemes those Boran who have at least a few livestock are relatively well placed to survive the decline in scheme productivity. But for those who have no stock life is particularly hard. Ever since Malka Dakaa and Merti schemes were first established in the early nineteen-seventies the farmers have been protected from meeting the costs of irrigation. Now that government and donor money has dried-up, the survival of the schemes depends on the farmers meeting at least some of the costs themselves. But without some other means of support, for instance livestock, they cannot do this, for a destitute cannot afford the risks nor the costs of irrigation agriculture. A healthy livestock sector in Isiolo District is therefore a necessary component of a healthy and productive agricultural sector.

Boran want to re-stock not because they are traditionalists but because livestock offer them the best prospects of rapid capital growth. There is no equally profitable alternative for the majority of the population. But stockowners realise the dangers posed by drought and disease, and nowadays no longer seek to keep large numbers of livestock as insurance blocks against natural calamity. Wealthy men whose flocks and herds reach a certain size will sell a proportion of the total and invest the money in property in town, in opening a shop or in a bank account.

Re-stocking does not only offer Boran the prospect of rapid capital growth but also the opportunity to re-colonize the wet season grazing areas of their district, which they abandoned after the Shifta war. Large parts of the district are either only lightly or completely un-grazed. Repeatedly when I pointed out to the stockowners the dangers of overstocking they pointed to the large areas of unexploited rangeland. There are dangers posed by Somali pastoralists, who have attempted at sporadic intervals since Shifta to colonize parts of the district, but the government has recently made a concerted effort to exclude them from the area. Re-stocking Boran would help in these efforts.

Although some families have managed partly to re-build their flocks, many cannot accumulate sufficient resources to buy livestock. These families are caught in a poverty trap. What resources they do command are dissipated in

the exigencies of daily living. It is these families which should be the target of any re-stocking programme. The provision of a flock would provide them with the means to economic 'take-off'. I do not, however, advocate a massive re-stocking programme, but rather, in the first instance, a small programme which could be closely monitored. In establishing such a programme there are a number of difficulties to be resolved:

- (1) the identification and selection of suitable families;
- (2) the appropriate number and range of stock to be given to each family;
- (3) the identification of a suitable source of disease free stock.

(1) The identification of families

The possible pit-falls in this process are amply demonstrated by the situation in Turkana District where many fairly well-off families have found their way into the relief camps. This was largely the result of an exclusive reliance on the word of local government chiefs. While the chiefs have a role to play in the selection of families their particular vested interests should be offset by an elected committee of local elders.

Destitution itself cannot be the only criteria of selection, but also a particular family's ability to manage the flock it is given. This will depend largely on the age and sex composition of the household.

(2) The number and range of stock

The number of stock given to each family will depend on the size of the unit. Pratt and Gwynne (1977, 37-38) suggest as a rule of thumb 3 standard stock units per person, i.e. 3 cows or roughly 15 small stock. But as this estimate is intended to provide a largely pastoral diet (75 per cent milk and 25 per cent meat) it is too high for families involved in a diversified economy. To provide a useful supplement to the family budget ISSU i.e. the equivalent of 5 sheep/goats per person should be sufficient.

Because of the relative cheapness (about US \$10-15 per head), availability and fast reproductive rate, small stock, especially goats, with their greater drought resistance and more eclectic food preferences to sheep, are clearly the most suitable stock for distribution, and the stock locally favoured by Boran.

(3) The identification of disease free stock

The initial programme will be small, involving only some fifty families, so finding a sufficient number of local disease free stock should not prove difficult. In March, 1983 plenty of small stock were coming to market at Malka Dakaa and Garba Tulla.

Settlement and agriculture are not solutions to the problems inherent in pastoral nomadism, nor do they automatically alleviate poverty. The Isiolo Boran case illustrates how large sums of money can be wasted in ill conceived and poorly executed development projects. If irrigation agriculture is to stand any chance of success in the district then a healthy livestock sector is imperative. Government and aid organisations cannot indefinitely subsidize non-economic irrigation schemes. If the farmers themselves are to be able to pay for their own in-puts then they need the support of a livestock sector which can generate not only additional income to cover periods of poor farm productivity but which can also provide increased economic security.

I argue in this paper for the re-vitalization of the livestock sector in Isiolo District through a programme to re-stock destitute pastoralists. Such a programme is urgently needed if Boran are to escape the downward spiral into poverty and dependence in which they have been caught since the Shifta war.

FOOTNOTE

1. Between 1966 and 1967 Boran were forced into the towns of Merti, Garba Tulla and Mado Gashe, and livestock were prohibited from grazing beyond a five mile radius.

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Richard Hogg
Department of Social Anthropology
University of Manchester
England

ISIOLO DISTRICT MAP 1

