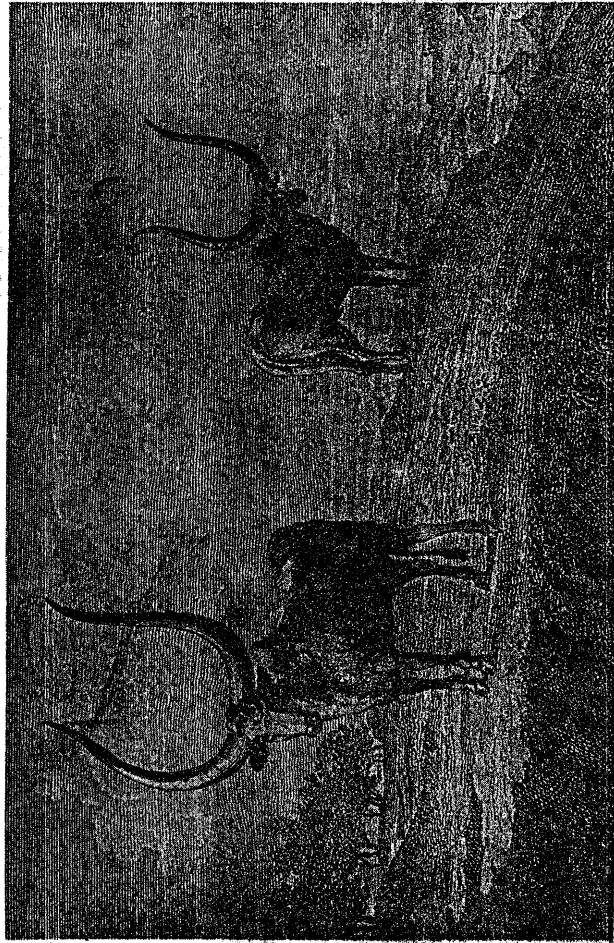


PROPERTY, POVERTY AND PEOPLE:
CHANGING RIGHTS IN PROPERTY
AND PROBLEMS OF PASTORAL DEVELOPMENT



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THE SYSTEM OF CATTLE REDISTRIBUTION AMONG THE BORAANA OBBUU AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

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In this paper, by presenting the specific case of the system of mutual assistance of the Boraana Obbuu of Sololo Division, Northern Kenya, I argue that traditional property systems and institutions may play a prominent part in development.

Droughts are recurring problems which confront African pastoralists. When a sequence of harsh droughts occur, people are forced to turn to different subsistence strategies. Nowadays they rely in the first instance on famine relief if it is available. But, for the people, the problem does not vanish with the end of the drought; households have to quickly reconstitute their herds until they are again sufficient to supply their subsistence needs. Cynthia White's essay on the Wodaabe (Fulani) in this volume clearly shows the dramatic consequences which may occur when the mechanisms which enable herd-reconstitution fail.²

The systems of animal redistribution of most pastoral societies consist, in practice, in the transfer of stock from viable homesteads to unviable homesteads. Such transfers contribute to the process of herd-reconstitution of each household or family unit. But, after severe droughts, it is likely that most households will be left with very few cattle indeed, and therefore unable to spare any animals for those who are even poorer. In such conditions, attempts to redistribute animals will probably fail.

The System of Cattle Redistribution

The main form of animal redistribution is the allocation of cattle to a stockless man by members of his clan or lineage. Descent groups have no relationship to any specific territory and members of any clan and lineage will live all over Boranaland.

According to Dahl, among the Borana of Isiolo District in Kenya, the case of any impoverished herder (gollee) is discussed at a meeting of clan elders, organized by a recognized clan leader, jallaaba. All the substantial local herdowners of the clan are expected to participate in such a meeting. The wealthier ones will be requested to provide the gollee a share from their own stock, sufficient to provide subsistence for his family (Dahl, 1979:173-4). As all the members of a local clan segment may suffer from the same environmental constraint, it is very likely that after a severe drought there will be no cattle to distribute, so the system of redistribution fails.

Though the Obbuu appear to follow a similar pattern to that described for the Isiolo Borana, they differ in one important way, in that the predicament of any Obbuu will not simply be the concern of the local lineages, but will also be the concern of other Borana across the frontier in Ethiopia. Indeed, the Obbuu tend to work at higher

organizational levels than those of Isiolo. If the local assistance fails, or if the number of cows available locally does not respond to the gollee's needs,⁴ redistribution is extended to involve the members of his clan, even if they are spread all over Ethiopian Boranaland.⁵ The problems of the gollee will be discussed at clan assemblies, kora gosaa, which are organized and led by the leading hayyuu of each clan.⁶ All clan members are involved, though not all of them will actually be physically present. The different situations of all the local communities will be described by the local leaders of each clan, jallaaba abaa q'ee, who will also co-ordinate the entire process according to their local competence.⁷

At such a meeting, the situation of each gollee is discussed as an independent and distinct case. At the end of each, the total number of cows which are needed for redistribution to the gollee will be decided upon, and each lineage of the clan of the gollee will be requested to provide an equal amount of cattle. The lineage leaders will then select the stock-owners, abbaa karraa, having regard to their wealth, who should contribute. Normally, no one homestead will be requested to provide more than one head, except when circumstances are desperate, rather the range of contributors is extended upwards from the lineage to the clan. The actual collection and distribution of the animals are entrusted to selected jallaaba.⁸

The peculiarity of this system lies in the possibility of animal transference between the Obbuu and the Borana of Ethiopia. This is related to the differences between the ecological environments of Ethiopian Boranaland and Obbuu. Obbuu is a lowland, mostly lying between 2,000 and 2,400 feet above sea level, with only a few sparse hills. Almost all of Boranaland in Ethiopia is highland, lying between 4,000 and 5,000 feet. The two zones have markedly different rainfalls; droughts normally affect the lowest zone most severely.

In 1983 and 1984, drought devastated both areas. In 1986, during my field-research in Uran Location, I was told by the few abbaa karraa who still possessed viable herds that they had been able to save approximately half or one-third of their animals because they had migrated to Ethiopia; whereas those who had stayed behind had lost all, or nearly all, of their cattle. The general devastation prevented any stock redistribution taking place. At the beginning of my field-research, in February 1986, only a few clans had actually held a post-drought kora gosaa, which normally, I was told, should have been held each year. Some clans held their kora gosaa during my stay and the rest were about to do so. To the best of my knowledge, by the end of my sojourn in October 1986, no distribution of cows had actually been carried out; though some clan sections, for instance the Karraym Danqaa, had already collected their herd ready for redistribution; indeed, some people in Uran Location were waiting to receive stock. Redistribution, therefore, in this case required the movement of some cattle from the highlands of Ethiopia to the lowlands of Kenya.⁹ Clearly, the situation in the highlands had not been as bad as that of the lowlands; although both areas had been seriously hit by the drought.

Mutual assistance across the different areas of Obbuu, and even across the international frontier, speeds up the herd-reconstitution of each production unit. Stock redistribution also requires migratory movement of stock with a consequent balanced exploitation of pastures.

Any positive development¹⁰ should, thus, involve both cattle redistribution as well as migratory movement to better pastures.¹¹

Social Context and Development Planning

There is no doubt that the system of traditional cattle redistribution has been, and is still today, an important institution for all the Borana, as well as for the other people in the area. Its value, therefore, needs to be considered in its cultural context, which can be reduced to the following points:

(1a) **The system of cattle property.** Individually 'owned' cattle cannot be considered as absolute private property: indeed, the mutual obligation which binds members of the same clan demonstrates the collective aspect of cattle property. A clan is conceived as a corporate whole, at least with regard to the herds owned by its members. It is, thus, that a clan assembly is legitimated to discuss and to dispose of individually-owned animals.

(1b) **Rituals.** During the Manidda¹² ceremony, which is held independently by each clan, a single large cattle enclosure is built, in which stock from different herds are mixed together. The symbolic value of such an enclosure may be taken as evidence of the way Borana regard their cattle. Cattle are seen in terms of the clan rather than in terms of the individual owners who make up that clan.

(2) **The system of value.** Cattle redistribution is basically tied to Borana ethics. Every male Borana is recognized to have a full right to become a self-sufficient member of his society. His own clan should enable that right to be realised. The ideology behind cattle redistribution is fundamental and widespread in pastoral societies. Indeed, if only the mere need for food were at issue, the problem could be solved simply by having the poor work for the wealthy for wages or food, or by types of stock loan.

(3a) **Social organization.** Cattle redistribution is set within the context of a traditional social organization. Its practical implementation is related to each clan and its leaders. Clan leaders derive their legitimacy from their position within the two major Borana institutions: those of the gadaa system and of the qaalluu. These institutions also play a prominent part in the ritual system.¹³

(3b) **The jural system.** Mutual assistance is, of course, regulated by laws and norms, and its observance is assured by the authority of institutional leaders.

Cultural change may affect these social factors and their inter-relation may be seriously compromised, affecting also the efficiency of the system of mutual assistance. According to the complaints of most of the elders, mutual assistance no longer works as effectively as it did in the old times. The elders stated that interpersonal solidarity is not as strong as it used to be. It may be evident that the adoption of new religions (changes in points 1b and 3a, indirectly in point 1a), the penetration of different values (point 2), the imposition of the state

(point 3b, indirectly point 3a) and involvement in the market economy (point 1a) must be reckoned among the main factors which have had a negative influence on the system of cattle redistribution.

Development projects are themselves factors of cultural change. Their planning should, therefore, be conceived in such a way as not to cause indirect effects which could compromise the efficiency of such long-tested systems and institutions as the cattle redistribution of the Borana. The achievement of a positive result requires an objective knowledge of the old systems which, if properly understood and applied, might become an inspiration and a stimulus for constructive innovations.

Notes

1. The term Obbuu is used by Boraana, who are one of the Oromo peoples, to indicate the lowlands immediately south of the Badha Escarpment, whose lower slopes approximately mark the border of Kenya and Ethiopia (see Gufu Oba's essay in this volume). In 1986, my field-research was centred in Uran Location. I wish to thank the Kenya authorities for granting permission to carry out research and the Institute of African Studies, Nairobi, for enrolling me as a Research Associate. I wish to thank Tamene Bitima for the Oromo orthography, Professor A. Colajanni and Professor S. Triulzi for their advice and special thanks to Professor B. Bernardi for his guidance during all my research. Among the Boraana, I owe special thanks to Banteee Abbagalaa, Kosii Gaeedoo, Gaigaloo Kosii Gado, Nuuraa Hukkaa Selee, Boruu Jirmoo and Mallicha Sooraa.
2. Cynthia White kindly sent me a first draft of her essay.
3. That is also the aim of restocking programmes like the Oxfam programme in Turkana District, discussed in this volume by Kelly Burke.
4. Ideally, a gollée should get the total refund of his loss. In practice, the actual amount of cattle will be related to many factors, the more important being the way he lost his animals, the general economic situation of the country, his network of relationships, his personal reputation and the size of his own clan. (I recall a man being refused clan assistance in 1951 because he had wasted the stock he had been given on two earlier occasions. He became a poor client/dependent, cf. Hilarie Kelly's essay in this volume, Ed.).
5. The exclusion of the Borana of Marsabit and Isiolo from this wider redistribution is probably due to their territorial separation from Obbuu and Ethiopia, and the higher degree of cultural change to which they have been subjected. The Borana of Marsabit and Isiolo no longer participate in the rituals and assemblies held in Ethiopia which are central to Borana culture.
6. By 'clan' I mean descent group whose members recognize a common hayyuu; a-clan may have more than one and, if so, their authority will be graded according to an order of seniority. See Haberland: 123-6, who gives a very full list of descent groups. My usage does not always correspond exactly with Haberland's; I call any segment of a descent group a 'clan' if its members recognize a common hayyuu.
7. The zone of competence of each jallaaba abbaa qe'ee is not structurally fixed. Every clan normally has between three and twelve jallaaba abbaa qe'ee who are distributed over the whole of Obbuu and Ethiopian Boranaland.
8. As the kora gosaa were held in Ethiopia and I was unable to cross the border, my present description of the organization of a kora gosaa is mainly based on the information of Banteee Abbagalaa, a jallaaba abbaa qe'ee of the clan Sirayguu.

9. Of course, the opposite movement of cattle is likely to occur as well, owing to other types of environmental constraints.
10. An alternative to pastoralism could be farming, which is already practiced as an integrative economic strategy by the Obbuu Borana. However, the ecological environment of Obbuu is not so suitable for agriculture, especially because of the low rainfall with the associated high risk of crop failure.
11. The international border is always a potential danger for the system of mutual assistance because governments may decide to limit freedom of movement of men and animals across it. Such measures, if they are effectively applied, are extremely harmful because they stop the seasonal migrations of the foaraa herds by both Ethiopian and Kenyan Borana from the highlands to the lowlands and vice-versa.
12. Each participating homestead is expected to bring all its cattle; this discourages large or frequent assemblies and participation by those who live far away. The senior elder of the clan should always be present. The Sirayyuu clan held their last Manidda about 1980 in Liban and the Karrayo Danga in 1983 at Dakale Gimbe, which is also in Ethiopia but not far from Obbuu.
13. See Baxter, 1965 and 1978.