

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DER - 13
Northern Frontier

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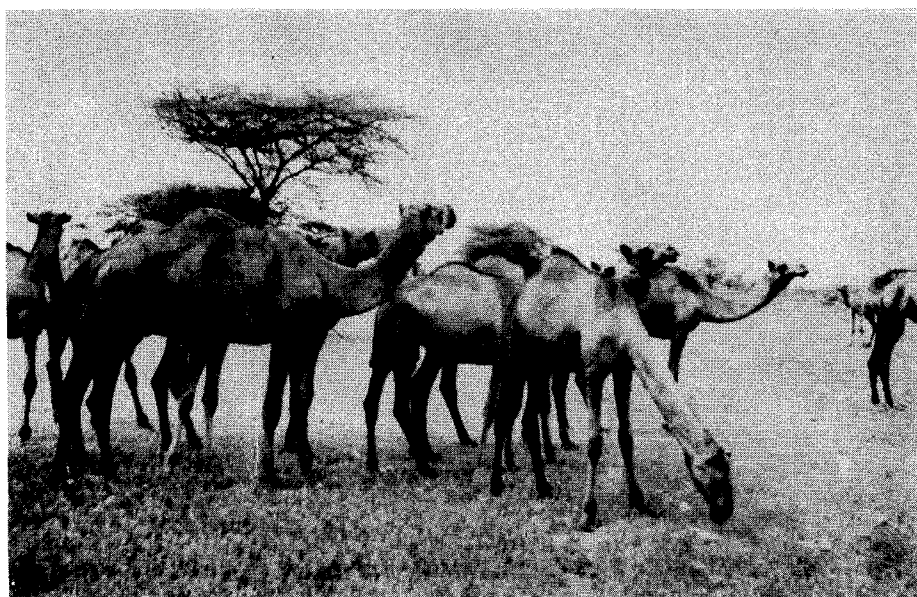
Mr. Walter S. Rogers
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New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Most years Kenya's Northern Frontier Province is harsh desert. It is desolate in a way, but at the same time there is a strange beauty about it. The plains are broken only by lava rock, twisted and leafless thorn trees and clumps of what resembles the American tumbleweed. Bare mountains, red, purple and yellow in color, rise jaggedly from the plains.

Nature is unyielding during these years, yet the frontier's Hamitic tribesmen manage to eke out a living. There are huge herds of game in the province as well and it is a hunter's paradise. The elephant have long, fine tusks and one encounters such rare buck as the gerunuk, a small gazelle with a long neck like a giraffe.

For man and beast, life is one continual trek for water and for new grazing. It takes up to 100 acres to support each head of cattle, so the tribes have to keep on the move continually, using camels to carry their meager possessions. What towns one finds in the frontier---consisting usually of a few tin-roofed dukas---are situated at wells and bore holes. Sometimes thousands of camels and other domestic animals are lined up at the watering places, exhausted from a long trek across the desert and waiting for a chance to drink. Often they wait for hours for their turn and the watering goes on day and night.



In past weeks, though, the desert has undergone a startling transformation. The lava rock fields are hidden in vast, indulating expanses of grass. Seeds that had lain dormant many seasons have burst forth again as if only one season had intervened. Luggas or watercourses that in the past held nothing but dust now contain life-giving water. Even the deformed little thorn trees have been affected---they have sprouted so many leaves that their grotesqueness and sharp thorns are all but hidden. No thirsty men and animals line up at the wells now. There is water everywhere.

The frontier has received heavy amounts of rain, something that occurs only once every three years or so. At Archer's Post, where the average rainfall is a half-inch a year, three inches fell in recent weeks. Life is always there among the rocks and thorns; all it needs is the magic touch of water.

These changes in the frontier came as a pleasant surprise to me when I spent a week there during December with Roger Brown, the government veterinary officer with whom I toured adjacent Samburu last August (DER - 3). This trip, like the last one, began at Isiolo, the "Gateway to the Northern Frontier," situated 50 miles to the northeast of Nanyuki. The Isiolo area, though, was hardly recognizable in the new profusion of greenery. Roger's mission this time was to assist in buying 5,000 sheep and goats that the Kenya Meat Commission wanted for the holiday market in Nairobi and Mombasa. The purchases were to be made at Garba Tula, a watering place of the Boran tribe 100 miles east of Isiolo on the road to Somalia.

Around Isiolo we saw little game. With the abundance of water and grazing, the game have dispersed over vast areas. One particular individual has not departed, though. Before starting out for Garba Tula we took a swim in Buffalo Springs and were informed later that a crocodile has taken up residence under an overhanging bush in one of the pools.

We were accompanied to Garba Tula by George Low, the senior live stock officer at Isiolo. Roger and I went ahead in his Studebaker pickup truck. George followed in his open safari wagon and an African driver brought up the rear in a three-ton lorry containing George's famous array of safari equipment.

The Kenya Meat Commission's order had been received just a short time before and Low, a veteran of 10 years in the frontier, had sent the habari (news) out at once. "The government wants to buy," went out over the bush telegraph. Traders' lorries which regularly criss-cross the NFP, carried the habari to outlying dukas. Chiefs and tribesmen spread it across the desert. As we traveled toward Garba Tula, the flocks were already converging. At times the road would be blocked as Boran herdsmen struggled to drive 50 to 500 bawling sheep and goats to one side.



Boran herdsman, with spear. Object hooked over his left arm is a head rest, used at night as a "pillow."

The desert sun is hot and the road is strewn with sharp lava rocks. We lost a tire en route. During the trip we passed a broken-down trader's lorry which a young Indian driver was patching up with unbelievable ingenuity. With no parts available, these lorry drivers fashion them from old pieces of pipe, tin cans, string and anything else available. Most of the lorries are old World War II British Army vehicles and it is a tribute to the mechanical witchcraft of the drivers that they still keep going.

Other lorries were stopped along the road as the drivers slept. Most NFP drivers sleep during the heat of the day and do their traveling in the mornings and evenings. At mid-day, with a full load, the heat of the road can burst a lorry's tires.

We covered the 100 miles to Garba Tula in three hours, something of a record, and found that the town consists of five dukas, three coffee houses and a mosque. The total population is about 50. Garba Tula means "everlasting water" in the Boran language and nearby are wells and a government bore hole. With only 2,600 feet of altitude, compared with 6,300 for Nanyuki, Garba Tula is humid and malarial.

Garba Tula may be off the beaten track of civilization, but Coca Cola has already reached it. The dukas, for the benefit of Boran warriors, display large colored signs showing grinning and curvaceous American bibis clutching Coca Cola bottles. "We show the Union Jack around the world and you show Coca Cola signs," is a standard British quip out here.

Otherwise civilization has made only a slight dent on the Boran. They originally were slaves of the wily Somalis, but with British rule they were freed. They couldn't be enslaved again, one Somali explained, because even if the "British gunment" did allow it, "these days everyone is too clever for that sort of thing."

The majority of the Boran---some estimate it at 75 per cent ---are Muslims and the rest are Pagans. "There is none single one Christian here," said the government tax collector at Garba Tula, a sharp-eyed little man, part-Arab and part-Boran, named Juma bin Omar.

Among the Muslims there are few who can read the passages of the Holy Koran. Attempts have been made by the government to introduce education in Boranland, but these have not been too successful. Like all nomads, they are never in one place long enough for their children to attend school. Consequently what schools there are must be boarding schools.

Anyway, the Boran says, why should the boy go to school? I didn't and my fathers didn't. Why should he? He needs to know how to care for the camels, the cattle and the sheep and goats that one day, Allah willing, will be his. He must know where the grazing lies and where Allah, in his infinite mercy, has provided water. He must defend the flocks from lion and he must know (if not read) the passages from the Holy Book.

The government made an effort once to induce the Boran to take up cultivation in some of the less arid places. The government handed out seeds and advice, but the Boran, as one frontier official put it, "hadn't a clue." The project was abandoned. "If the government doesn't trouble them about improvements, they stay just as they are," said one of Garba Tula's dukakeepers. "They don't even want injections for their cattle. They say, 'Our forefathers didn't need these things so why should we?'"

So the Boran continue to live on milk and meat, with a few odd purchases of sugar, tea and maize from the dukas. The Pagans drink blood by tapping the vein of a living domestic animal. The tribe uses their female camels for milk and the male camels for carrying their tiny animal-skin tents and bundles of tent poles on their endless journeys around the trackless desert.

George arrived at Garba Tula a short time after we did and we sat back under a tree in front of the veterinary department's thatch-roofed rest house to watch the spectacle that would follow. George, a middle-aged, ruddy and portly Scotsman, is no man to rough it and when his steaming vehicles pulled up, his half a dozen African servants hopped out and, like soldiers at drill, quickly and smartly went through their ordained routine.

First from the vehicles came camp chairs (four). The Africans hopped about quickly setting them up in front of the rest house and George eased his bulk into one of them. Then came tables (four also). One was placed in front of us. The other three went into the rest house (one dining table, one serving table, one for George's personal effects).

Next came George's camp cot (with mosquito netting, sheets, pillows and blankets.) On a table next to the cot was laid out mosquito lotion, shaving items, military brushes, a flashlight, reading matter, bottles of medicine and other items (each in its proper, preordained place, so George would have no trouble finding them in the dark.)

Then from the lorry came a portable canvas bathtub and washbasin. These were filled with water (hot---just heated over a fire hastily-built by another African.) Towels, soap and a bottle of Dettol (to disinfect the water) were laid out. A piece of canvas was also put down (so that George would not get his feet dirty on stepping from the tub.)

Next (with George impatiently hurrying them on) a couple of Africans came running up with a case of assorted spirits (gin, brandy and Scotch), a case of beer and a case of soda water. One of the Africans placed them on the table in front of George (gin to the right, brandy in the middle, Scotch on the left). George studied the bottles impartially for a minute, then poured himself a brandy and bade his guests do likewise.

Another African appeared out of the dark with two Thermos jugs (containing ice) and still another ran up with several bottles of pure water (brought from Isiolo and said by George to be sweeter than local water.)

Next all six Africans (with much groaning) unloaded a huge wooden crate from the truck. On the ground it yielded up a refrigerator (gas-burning.) The refrigerator was quickly lighted and water was quickly put into the ice cube trays (for later rounds.) From other boxes came meat, butter, milk, cream, cheese, fruits and vegetables.

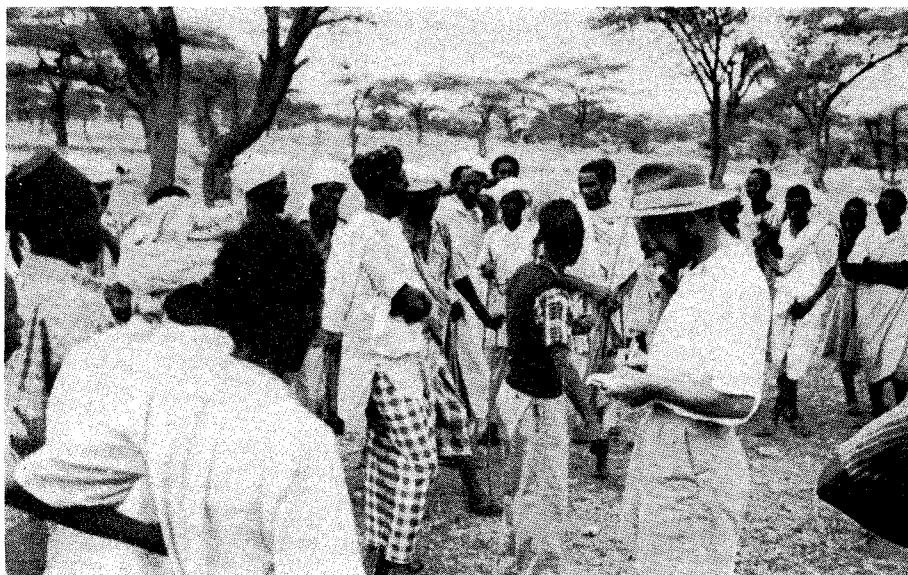
The truck finally disgorged a large tent and this was erected some distance from the rest house. Roger and I would sleep there because, George explained, he (George) snores so loudly that no one else can sleep. Roger's kit and my belongings (consisting of only a few pitiful items) were unpacked by the nimble Africans (who, I suspect, had sneers on their faces.)

George, well into his umteenth drink, was surveying the activity. He had the concealed pride of a general who is pleased with the performance of his troops but loath to show it lest the visitor think that it is something out of the ordinary. "Boy!" George called and a voice responded, "Bwana?" "Lete Fliti," George intoned. An African ran up with a Flit gun to spray DDT on George's mosquito-bitten legs.

Off in the distance the drums were starting. The Boran were having a dance. Above the drums came the sound of chanting and hand-clapping. The rythm was fast, the chanting harsh.

For the next several days we were busy buying sheep and goats ---or what is called by those names. Neither look like the U.S. models. They are tiny and scrawny, the products of a fierce struggle for survival in an inhospitable land. The sheep bear no wool but are what is called "hair sheep." Each has a huge pad of fat on its buttocks to enable it to survive for a considerable period of time without food.

The animals were purchased in lots with Juma, the tax collector, acting as interpreter and major domo. "Eleven shillings each," George would exclaim, his portly figure surrounded by several dozen bawling sheep and goats. This would be translated into Boran by Juma and followed by an outraged expression and torrent of words from the seller.



Juma (wearing fez, sleeveless sweater and sports shirt) discusses price with group of herdsmen. Roger (right, wearing bush hat) keeps records.



In the sale pen

"He says, Sir," Juma translated in one case, "I have gone to great expense in getting this flock to Garba Tula. I have had them brought here in lorries because I want them to be in good condition for my government. Therefore I must have 15 shillings."

"Nonsense," George replied, casting a critical eye at the bedraggled animals. "The government will give 12 shillings, but no more."

Another excited exchange in Boran followed and then Juma said: "He wants to know, Sir, if the government will be good to him and give him 12 and a half? No? Well, he says he will take 12, then."

Each sale completed, Juma would push the seller roughly to get him to move on quickly and then he would snap his fingers for the next man to bring his animals into the selling pen. The animals just purchased would be driven into another pen and there dabbed with yellow paint so that no enterprising person could seize upon the confusion of the moment to sell them back to his government again.

About the most impressive figure at the sale was Galma Dida, chief of the southern Boran. He stands well over six feet and carries an inlaid walking stick that houses a sword. Dida has been a chief for 30 years. He took over at the age of 16 on the death of his father. Allah has been good to Dida, as is his way with chiefs, and Dida has 100 camels, 400 head of cattle and 3,500 goats and sheep. When I asked Juma to introduce me to the chief, the little tax collector snapped his fingers at the chief and shouted for him to come over. The chief did, with alacrity.



Galma Dida

Frontier, excluding Garissa District, for an average price of 15 shillings (\$2.10) each. Thus the tribesmen realized \$210,000 annually. Now, however, sales have dropped 50 per cent because Emergency restrictions and hazards have kept Kikuyu buyers out of the frontier.

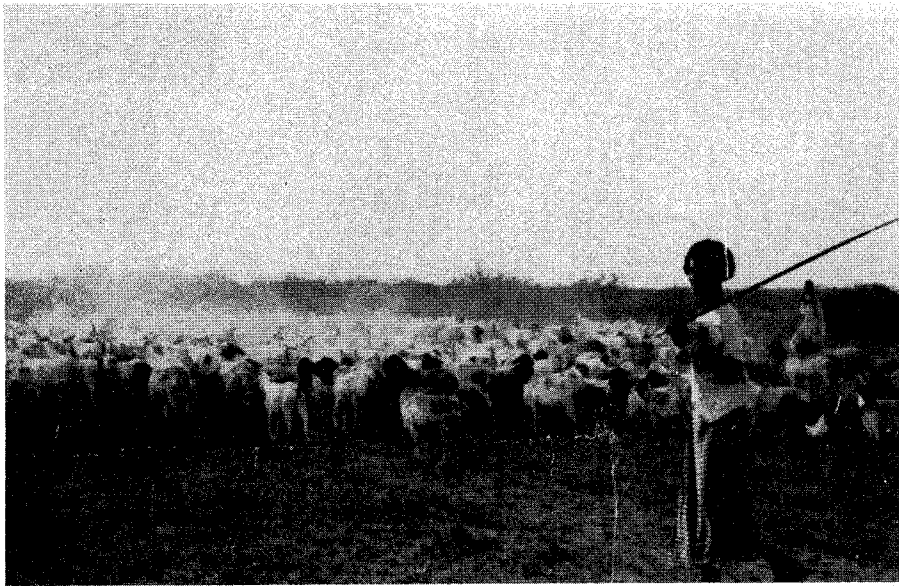
Those animals bought by George and Roger that were in good condition would be driven to Isiolo on foot. The others would be taken there in trucks. From Isiolo, all would be trucked to Nanyuki and then put aboard trains for Nairobi and Mombasa. Within a week or so the sheep and goats of the desert would be on sale on the butchers' counters of those two cities.

Dida does not speak English, but he does know Swahili. Although he is not educated, he does understand the value of cattle inoculations and has been urging them on his reluctant people.

At the end of each day's sale, the Boran would line up for payment. Some received as much as 700 shillings (\$100).

"What will they do with the money?" I asked Juma. Juma was busy glaring at a fierce old man who had been a chief and had been sacked for stirring up trouble between the clans. I had to repeat the question. "Oh, they will spend it all, Sir. They will save nothing," Juma said with a sneer. They would buy their sugar, tea and maize from the dukas, perhaps purchase some clothing for their women and they would settle accounts at the dukas. Then they would pay their taxes of 20 shillings (\$2.80) a year. I gave Juma a cigaret and he said, "Thank you very mercifully, Sir."

Before the Mau Mau Emergency, approximately 100,000 sheep and goats were sold annually in the Northern



En route
on the
100-mile
journey
to Isiolo

As we were leaving Garba Tula at the end of the week, with 5,000 sheep and goats already on their way to Isiolo, I had a few words with Juma. "Ah, this place is looking beautiful now, Sir," the tax collector said, glaring contemptuously at the thorn trees. "But come back in a few months and there will be nothing. Absolutely nothing. It is a very dull place for an educated man like myself, a senior tax collector." Juma spat on the ground for emphasis. "Rocks, rocks, nothing else."

Sincerely,

David E Reed

David E. Reed

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