

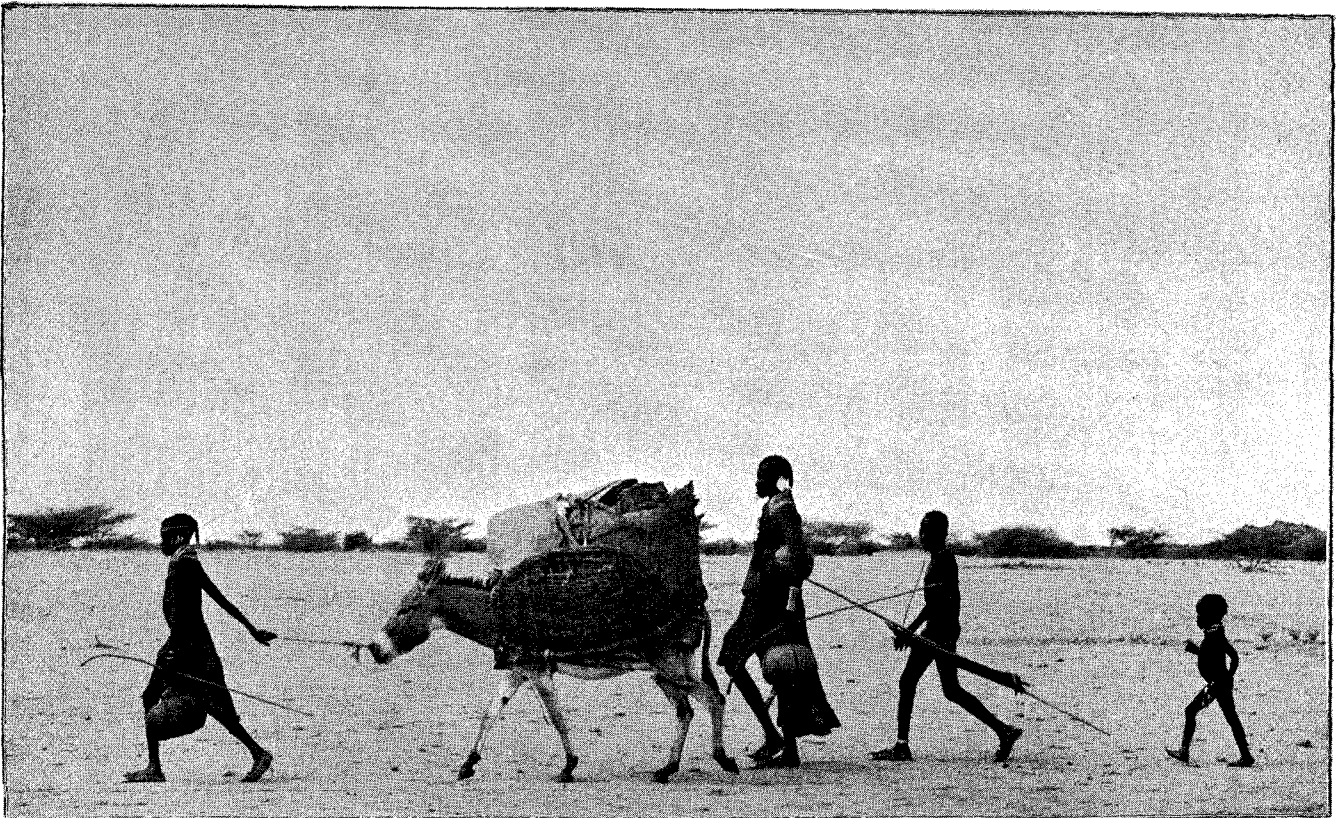
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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JS-1
Change in Turkana

P.O. Box 5113
Nairobi, Kenya
19 Jan 63

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York



" A way of life.....centuries old." Turkana on the move.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Legend has it that once, long ago, a band of youths wandered south from the Ethiopian Highlands in search of a lost ox. After a long and bootless hunt, they happened on an old woman of their tribe picking fruit in an area of lush fertility. Entranced, the youths forgot about their ox and rushed home to spread the news of their discovery. The elders of the tribe listened calmly to the youths' excited stories, thought for a while and then turned to other things. Stung by this indifference, the young men gathered their livestock and possessions and left for the new land.

Such a move is known by anthropologists to have taken place and although absence of a written tradition makes the proper date

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E T H I O P I A

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Rudolf

Ferguson's Gulf

Lodwar

U G A N D A

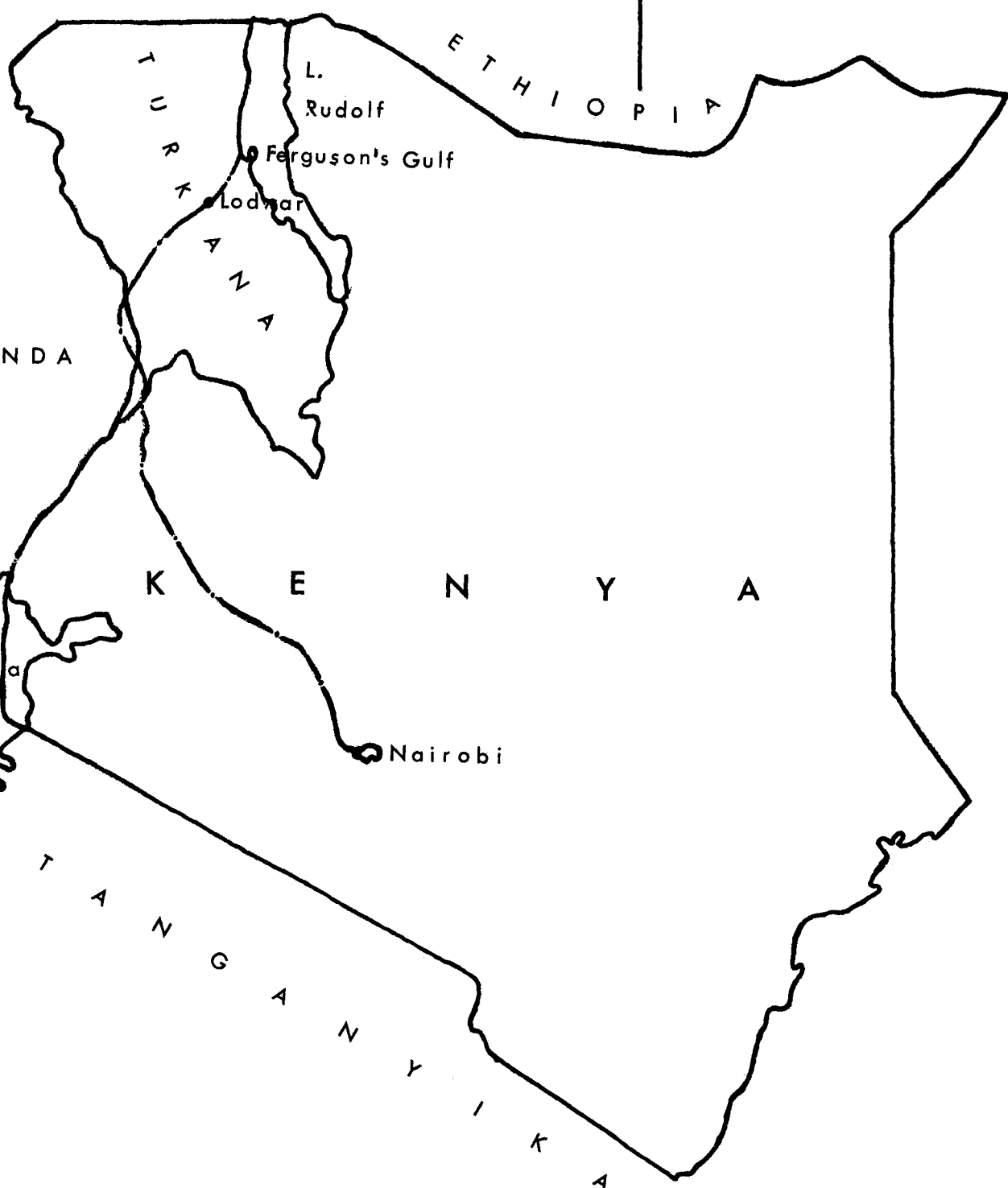
K E N Y A

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T A N G A N Y I K A

— . — . — . — . — our route by car



difficult to determine, it is generally believed that the migration occurred about 200 years ago. Whatever the birthdate of the pastoralist Turkana*, the fabled lushness of their land is now nothing but a tantalizing green memory, for years of scant rain and overgrazing have turned Turkana into a dusty, barren desert from which, even in the best of climactic times, a living can barely be scraped. Normally, the meager (2-20 inches per year) rains come savagely and briefly. The eroded land cannot hold moisture and the rain runs quickly off, carrying with it whatever topsoil it can find, to form rushing torrents which dry into rivers of sand. The plain greens for a short while, providing food for the Turkana livestock- cattle, camels, donkeys, goats and sheep.

In 1961, a long drought was followed by soaking rains and floods which brought desolation in place of sustenance and the Government set up camps to provide food for the famine-stricken Turkana. One such camp had been in operation since 1934 at Ferguson's Gulf on the western shore of Lake Rudolf and it was apparent that famine relief camps were a temporary palliative not a cure, for as long as the Turkana persisted in overgrazing their denuded land, starvation would always lower nearby. What disturbed the Government most about the camps was the change camp life made in the Turkana. From proud, self-sufficient nomads, famous in war, the camp dwellers became listless beggars. A revitalizing force was needed that would create the beginnings of a cash economy and reduce the Turkana's enervating dependence on the camps.

One had not far to look in desolate Turkana for this stimulus. Lake Rudolf, 154 miles long and 20 miles wide, was known to be Kenya's only remaining unexploited fishery, undepleted by the primitive efforts of the few lacustrine Turkana or by a small European fishing camp that had been in fitful operation for a few years. The District Commissioner, then a Mr. Hill, felt that if more Turkana could be taught to fish using simple but modern equipment, a stable food source would be created, the catch could be sold to the Government for the famine camps and the local economy could be moved from its barter base.

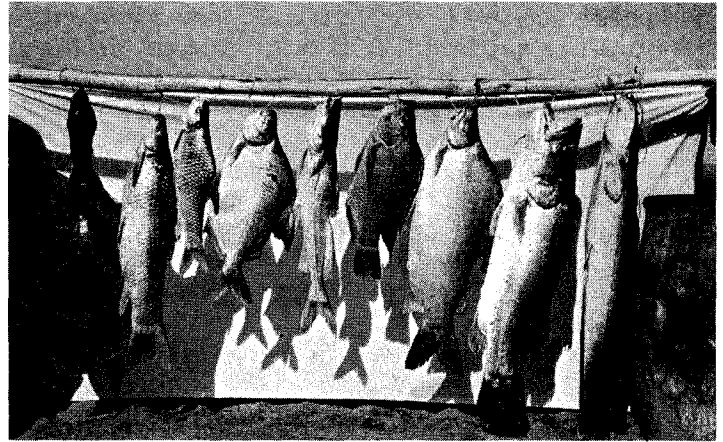
The Government reacted favorably to Hill's idea and in the fall of 1961 a Fisheries Officer, Bob McConnel, arrived at Ferguson's Gulf charged with the task of changing a way of life that was centuries old.

The Ferguson's Gulf project had been cited to me as a unique self-help effort in an area previously considered hopeless and when our friend Bud Fallon, an AID advisor to the Kenya Department of Agriculture, asked if I would like to join him on a trip to Lake Rudolf, I accepted immediately.

It's 500 miles north from Nairobi to Lokwakangole (Ferguson's Gulf for short) through the cool, rolling, green Highland country to the hot, flat dun floor of the Rift Valley of Turkana. The closest thing

* The Turkana tribe live in the Turkana district, of the Northern Province of Kenya.

to a town in the District is Lodwar, famous as a detention home of Jomo Kenyatta. Its inhabitants are, in order of importance; the District Commissioner, one District officer, one European clerk, a company of the King's African Rifles, a detachment of Turkana Police, a few Asians who operate four dukas and several nude Turkana males who hold up the duka walls, scratch and spit.



From a morning's catch*

Ferguson's Gulf is another 45 road miles from Lodwar over a rutted, aggravating track. Supercilious camels wait until the last minute to clear the road and lumber off in their knock-kneed, loose-limbed way, signalling their departure and their disdain for humanity with a fanfaronade of broken wind. The first hint of the lake comes with the rasp of a seagull overhead and soon the landscape changes from scrub to palm and the smell of water is in the air.

Bob McConnel was waiting for us at the shore when we arrived and after quickly piling our gear into his outboard-powered skiff, we sped out of the marshy inlet towards the fishing camp across the mouth of the Gulf. The stutter of our engine startled waterfowl into the air, a pinwheeling flutter of flamingo, ibis, cormorant, teal, pelican, duck and stork. We passed through what appeared to be giant water lilies covered with cormorants squawking welcome. Bob explained that the floods had caused the Lake to rise 18 feet and that what we saw were the tops of submerged palm trees. If we looked hard enough, he said, somewhere under one of the trees would be his old garage. The ride across the muddy Gulf seemed to take no time at all, for Bud and I were busily spotting crocodiles and marvelling at the great expanse of the Lake to our left. The fishing camp soon came into sight—a cove, 2 palm thatched huts, a canvas tent, 2 rowboats pulled up on a sandy beach and some nets drying in the sun.

Ferguson's Gulf was picked as the site of the experiment for two reasons, Bob told us. First, the presence of a famine camp assured a market and a labor supply and second, the quiet waters of the Gulf are sheltered from the often dangerous vagaries of the Lake wind. The location chosen, there was no difficulty in obtaining the requisite man-

* From left to right— Lake Turtle, Barbus byuni, Citharius Citharinus, Bagrus bayad, unknown, Tilapia Nilotica, Distachadus, Lates Niloticus Rudolfus (Nile lurch), Clarias. The Tilapia and Nile Perch are as good-tasting fish as I have ever eaten. The largest Perch netted weighed over 300 pounds!

power, for famine camp life was dull and the lure of potential profit made recruitment easy. The Government had provided enough money for a few nets, some twine to repair them with, 3 rowboats and a outboard motor. The rest was up to the Turkana and Bob.

Camp life follows a simple pattern. At dusk we saw the fishermen push out into the lake to set their nets and the next morning chattering voices woke us just before dawn as the men piled into the boats to collect their catch. Two hours passed before they came back into view and the boats ground up on the beach. An impatient crowd of Turkana swarmed over the dripping, fish-filled nets, assaying the catch with loud "OOOhs" and "AAAhhs" and much good humoured horseplay. Soon men, women and children covered the shore, busily hacking the fish into fillets with tin can tops and wrist knives (rounded 4 or 6 inch nails hammered flat, sharpened and worn as bracelets). The fillets were put on pole-suspended nets to dry and the rest of the fish were taken home to eat. After 3 or 4 days, the fillets are bagged and sold to Bob for 50 East African cents a pound. (East African currency consists of shillings- \$.14 - and cents. There are 100 cents in a shilling)

This, then, is the Ferguson's Gulf fishing scheme. A simple operation, repeated day after day, but what it has revealed about a few Turkana may very well change the lives of the entire tribe.

The Fisheries Department feared that once the Turkana saw how easy it was to catch fish in the new nets, they might work just hard enough to keep themselves fed and no more. This definitely has not been the case, for the fisherman seem to have hurdled the distance between the subsistence economy of primitive pastoral life and the incentive system of modern capitalism in a quick bound. Several of them have borrowed nets from Bob, paid for them and then bought more. One man even operates a net-renting service! Moreover, the fishing project has revealed a fascinating social flexibility in the Turkana. The males now cheerfully consent to do work they would never have done before. Collecting firewood, gutting fish- these were for women; men fought, hunted and accumulated wives. Noble though this attitude may be, it jibed ill with the hard economic facts of the modern world that the white man brought to Kenya. Bob's project has proved that, given an incentive, the Turkana men will work and work well.

Preparing the nets



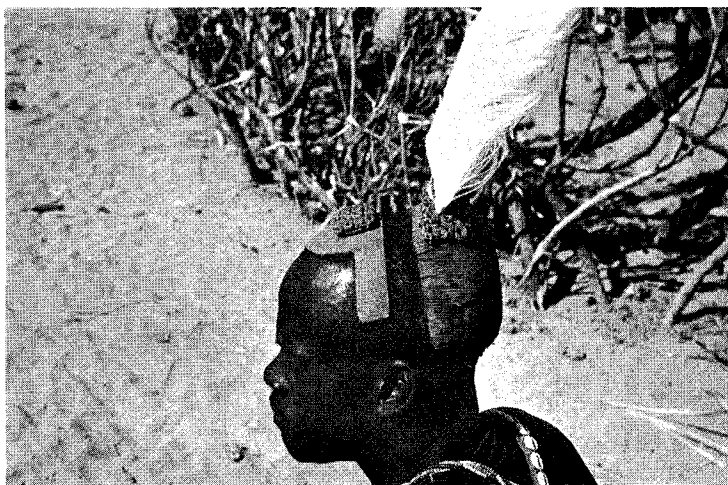
The success of Ferguson's Gulf has led to plans for two similar operations. One south of the Gulf, where the seasonal Turkwel River joins Lake Rudolf; the other near the very top of the

Lake at the mouth of its only permanent source, the Omo.* Here, fish will be caught as they go unstream to spawn.

The bright future for Turkana that these projects promise cannot be realized without more money. Bob has now just enough to buy repairing twine for 6 months and although "Oxfam" (The Oxford Famine Relief Fund) has given a new launch that is to arrive in February and has contributed to the improvement of the road between Lodwar and Ferguson's Gulf, the fishing project will die without more working funds. A sad death it will be, not only for the loss to the Turkana, but because it will rob the Government of a rare scheme that will reduce expenditure by the eventual elimination of famine camps and create revenue from taxation of the increasingly successful fisherman.

A Turkana dandy

What if enough cash is provided? Bob's pupils will not be long in producing more fish than the famine camps can use. What next? It seems odd that Kenya's most famous fishery should provide the best possible outside market place for Turkana fish, but this is just the case. Lake Victoria has been progressively overfished and the Abaluhya and Jalu fishermen there cannot supply the markets just back of the Lake that had long counted on fish as an



important part of their diet. These newly fishless regions would appear to be a proper target for the Turkana. So they are- but there is stiff competition. Before the Congo difficulties, dried fish from the Tanganyika end of Lake Victoria found a good price in the Eastern Congo. This market is closed now and until it reopens, Tanganyika fish will compete in Kenya villages.

Another source of competition has been created, oddly enough by the Fisheries Department itself. The gradual retraction of the Lake Victoria source was no surprise to the Department which had long warned the obstinate lakeside tribes of the dangers of overfishing. As a countermeasure, in areas affected by the diminishing fish supply, it encouraged individuals to build small ponds on their property. The local Fisheries Officer then stocked them on the condition that the fish be eaten only by the individual's family and not sold. There are now 8000 of these ponds and they are becoming increasingly popular.

*Lake Rudolf has no known outlet. An evaporation rate of 135 inches per year- compared to 32 inches in Nairobi- keeps the level constant.

In the inland parts of Kenya, Lake Rudolf fish must face still another obstacle in the classic opposition of the tribal African to any change in his diet, no matter how nutritionally wise or money saving it may be. The eater of meal, meat, milk or vegetables will consider fish only as a last resort. An interesting example of this has occurred in the African locations of Nairobi where the City Council has sponsored nutrition courses for women taught by trained African dieticians. Initially, the response is good, but the young students soon run into the solid opposition of their older relatives. "What was good for our ancestors is good enough for us," say the old ones. In the more old fashioned families, this settles any question of change of diet, for the younger women traditionally must give way to the old.

There remains the question of management. If the Turkana scheme receives enough money to keep it alive and if it can capture and hold a market outside the Northern Province, some sort of body must be formed which will collect and distribute the fish on a large, organized scale. The Fisheries Department wants to give control of the project to the Turkana African District Council as soon as possible, for there is a shortage of Fisheries Officers and Bob is needed elsewhere. After this transfer, a Cooperative is envisaged which will collect the fish at a central point and sell it. The success of a Cooperative would depend on its management. The person in charge must know the Turkana and how to market fish. He has to be a good teacher and must not be deterred by the loneliness and intense heat of the Turkana plains.

* * *

We had much to think about as we bumped our way home. Without doubt, after a year and a half of life, the Ferguson's Gulf project had achieved its initial goal, for the beginnings of an independent cash economy had been formed. There are problems, but I think that the major ones of money; of marketing and of management can be solved. The Fisheries Department feels that the Government, though financially hard pressed and costive, will squeeze out the money needed to sustain the project. The acceptance of Lake Rudolf fish by the inland African will steadily increase as education erodes tradition. Finally, in the absence of Kenya aid, the U.K., U.N. or U.S. can provide the managerial skills necessary to establish a Cooperative. With the base of a successful Cooperative system, the Turkana fishermen could can and freeze their catch thereby enabling it to enter the East African and world markets. The significance of the Ferguson's Gulf scheme is that it has proved that the distance between a primitive barter existence and the beginnings of a cash economy can be cleared at a single leap.

Sincerely,


John Spencer

The photograph on page 1 is reproduced through the courtesy of Mr. L.E. Fallon.

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