

Although mankind was supposed to have shifted from pastoralism to settled agriculture ten thousand years ago, there are still some seven million people in East Africa who are nomadic pastoralists. They include some two million Somali nomads who follow the rains and grass, heedless of the political borders of Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Also included are the Masais, who regularly cross the "closed" Kenya-Tanzania border; the Turkanas, Sam-burus, Pokots, and Boranas in Kenya; the Nuers in Ethiopia; the Dinkas in the Sudan; the Karamojas of Uganda; and the Lunda-Luvala of Zambia.

Advances in veterinary medicine, availability of water through bore holes, the increased demand for meat and commercialization of cattle herding have expanded the migratory herds of nomadic pastoralists. The large herds have exceeded the carrying capacity of the rangelands, which have also decreased in size as settled agriculture has expanded. The "drought with the long tail", which swept through Sahelian Africa, finally reached East Africa in 1972-1975. One of the countries hardest hit by the drought was Somalia, where close to three-quarters of the population are still nomads.

In 1973-1974, neither the short rains nor the long rains came to Somalia. The resulting drought devastated the herds of nomadic pastoralists. The Somali Government reacted to the emergency by setting up 20 relief camps. More than 268,000 pastoralists had flocked to these camps by May 1975.

The rains returned in 1976 and many of the nomads returned to the rangelands to build up their herds once more. However, fearing that another drought might come, and deciding to turn a disaster into an opportunity, the Somali Government organized a nomad resettlement effort. Planners estimated that the rangelands in their denuded state would be able to absorb only 128,000 nomads. Some 105,000 nomads would have to be resettled in agricultural and fishing communities as others spontaneously found their way into cities and towns.

With assistance from the Kuwait Fund and the World Bank, Somalia has set up three agricultural communities in Kurtun Waarey, Sablaale, and Dujuma, and three fishing communities in Brava, Adalle, and Eyl. The agricultural settlements were designed for commercial agriculture planted to sesame seeds, rice, bananas, corn, and a variety of cash crops. They range in size from 23,000 people in Kurtun Waarey to more than 40,000 in Dujuma. The settlements are planned as self-contained units, with the communities clustered around schools, a hospital, and community centres. Vast irrigated fields surround them. Huge pumps throb late into the night, bringing precious water from the Juba and Shabeli rivers to the green fields. The soil is fertile: these lands are being brought

# Somalia

## Nomads no more

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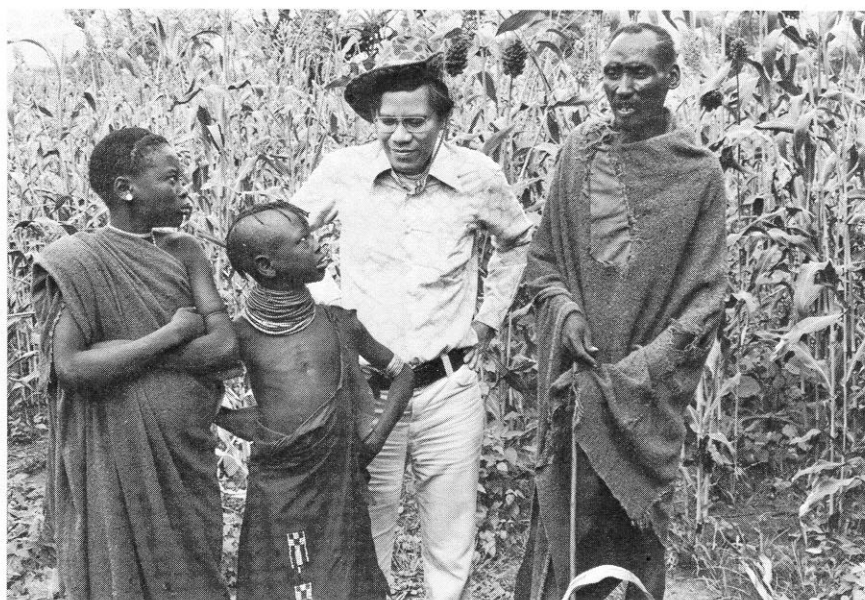
under cultivation for the first time, and the silt from the rivers has enriched the soil for centuries.

Amazingly, the fishing communities on the shores of the Indian Ocean seem to have thrived much faster than the agricultural settlements. In Brava, officials of the Fisheries Department report that former nomads were swimming in the ocean in less than a week. People were able to overcome their aversion to eating fish very quickly and acquired fishing skills in no time at all. Social scientists speculate that the rapid adjustment to fishing as a way of life may be due to the fact that the previous experiences of the nomads did not include fishing. Until they were brought to the fishing communities, almost none of the nomads had even seen the ocean. Without prior knowledge of fishing as a way of life, no negative stereotypes and taboos were acquired by the nomads. In contrast, the pastoralists have always looked at agriculture as a grubby occupation. Among the Masai, in fact, it is practically a sin to break the soil, as the earth is the source of grass, which is the

food of much valued cattle. Besides, as one farmer nomad was heard to comment in Adalle, "the sea is just like the desert, when one is in a boat and there is nothing else but space, the sun and the sky".

Cultural transition was helped in the agricultural settlements somewhat in that commercial farming, as practised in the settlements, is vastly different from the subsistence agriculture so despised by nomads. The ground in the settlements is broken up by huge tractors and irrigation canals are dug by gigantic digging machines. The crops planted are unfamiliar to the nomads, a fact that really does not matter, it seems, because they are destined for foreign markets. The irrigation pumps disgorge vast amounts of water, which in the rangelands had to be dug up and scooped out of dry riverbeds. Most important of all in the agricultural communities, is that there are practically no cattle, although an occasional sheep or goat, perhaps a family pet, may be found loitering around.

From a social science viewpoint, the



*The author (centre) with a Turkana family in Kenya. Although the Turkanas are still largely nomadic pastoralists, this family has given up its traditional way of life and settled on a corn farm.*

transition from nomadic pastoralism to settled agriculture and fishing constitutes a radical change process that if properly understood may provide knowledge and insights useful in designing development programs. This is the reason why IDRC is interested in supporting Somali social scientists who have proposed to study what is happening in the new settlements.

From the time the nomads were picked up from the refugee camps, loaded into airplanes, flown to Mogadishu, trucked to the settlements, and then housed in tents there, their lives were a dizzying process of change. Where on the rangelands the nomads subsisted mainly on milk, wild plants, and the occasional meat, they were now fed with Canadian wheat, American powdered eggs, Australian cheese, and Uruguayan corned beef — courtesy of the UN World Food Programme. The open rangelands became the confines of the camp perimeter. Mobile tents of sticks and skin were replaced by huts of reed and the occasional plastic sheet or old tarpaulin. The nomads now rode in lorries and tractor-trailers instead of on camels and donkeys. The dry desert heat of the northern rangelands gave way to the humid clamminess of the southern river valleys.

Many of the changes were consciously introduced by government officials to radically alter the life of the former nomads. Nomad families were organized into units of ten, gathered together in a cluster of huts. The 10-family units were then organized at a higher level of 50 families, then into sectors of 100 families and zones of 400 families. Leaders of these various organizational levels were chosen by elections. Responsibility for health, education, farm work, skills training, etc., was lodged in specific leaders.

If someone is sick, the leader must make sure he or she is treated in the clinic or hospital. No woman is allowed to give birth at home, only in the hospital. The leader must make sure that all school age children are in school. Leaders also organize work groups and community activities.

In the nomadic society, loyalty was to the clan. When the nomads were reorganized, the government decided that families from various clans would be mixed up in the new social units so that "tribalism" would be eroded. Economic transactions, instead of being valued in cattle, camel, sheep, and goats, are now reckoned in Somali shillings. A herdsman does not slowly build up his herd so that he can become prosperous and "buy" more wives. He receives "pocket money" from the Settlement Development Agency (SDA) instead, commensurate to the time he spends working in the fields, raising crops he will not eat, shipped to areas he does not know. Even the tradition of the "bride price" has been abolished. An old man in Kurtun Waarey sadly sighs — "look at

all those beautiful one-hundred-camel maidens working in the fields; now they will only fall in love and get married and not bring wealth to their poor fathers".

What have been the reactions of the former nomads to these changes? For one, they have not "voted with their feet" by leaving the settlements. An SDA official, peeved by the persistent insinuations of a foreign visitor, quietly asks; "do you see a fence around the settlement, armed guards to keep the people from leaving?" A census of all families has been kept by the SDA since the communities were set up. Figures show that about 10 percent of the original settlers have left, most of these returning to the rangelands. Those who left tended to be the richer nomads, who had provided insurance for themselves by "loaning" cattle and camels to relatives and friends. They now feel that with the return of the rains, they can start the painstaking process of building up their herds again.

For most of the settlers, however, the drought has finished off their herds. Life in the new settlement, though initially strange, has provided the certainty of food, shelter, medical help, education for the children, and most important of all, income. Many of the settlers still know where the herds are — they periodically disappear from the settlement to heed family obligations or participate in clan celebrations. But they always return, somehow.

At times, problems and misunderstandings have occurred between the former nomads and the settlement agency. The proud nomads grumbled about having to line up, calabash gourd in hand, for food rations. The SDA, upon learning the complaint, quickly changed procedures by making the leaders in the 10-family units responsible for food distribution, and by rotating distribution of food on different days. When the nomads complained about the fact that they were not compensated for their labour, the agency started giving them "pocket money" (not wages, for the resources of the government are still insufficient to pay regular wages).

At present, the settlement agency is formulating plans for "revillagization" — the distribution of people among carefully planned communities that will become the local government units in the area. Each community is being established around a public service area where there will be a school, health centre, community meeting place, and other government facilities. Families will be allocated residential plots and farmlands so they can grow their own food nearby. The commercial farms, however, will probably continue to be the source of paid employment, although it is hoped that people will be able to supplement their incomes by nonagricultural pursuits such as handicrafts, trade, and even small scale industries. The goal is to completely transform the nomad's world view so that they will be nomads

no more.

There are those who say of the nomad resettlement program that it is inhumanely changing a people's way of life and not respecting their cultural identity. To these criticisms, officials in Somalia point out that the program was a response to the crisis brought about by the long drought, and insurance against the day when the drought will come again. Most of the nomads were rendered destitute by the loss of their herds. The drought responsible for this was largely due to ecological changes that could be attributed to the rapid increase in people and animals in the badly denuded rangelands. Paradoxically, if pastoral nomadism is to be preserved as a way of life, some of the nomads have to be taken out of the rangelands to ease the ecological pressures.

Government planners in Somalia estimate that 65 percent of the country's 3.2 million people are nomadic or seminomadic pastoralists. They figure that from 1977 to 1981, some 186,000 more people will be added to this group by natural increase and migration. They hope that the number of nomadic and seminomadic pastoralists can be kept at their current levels or even reduced, which can only be done by encouraging nomads to join the agricultural sector. This, in turn, can best be done by moving the "excess" nomads to agricultural settlements.

Somalia, as a nation, is lucky in having a common identity that is enhanced by a common language, Islam as a religion, and a deep sense of tradition and history. Unlike many other countries in Africa, Somalia is not plagued by ethnic and other divisions (even the danger of "tribalism" in Somalia refers to differences among clans rather than real tribes). Somali leaders are mightily trying to achieve the benefits of modernization in the shortest time possible. It is in this connection that they are confronting the most important development reality in their country, that of nomadic pastoralism. Rightly or wrongly, Somali leaders are enthusiastically trying to preserve a viable pastoral society on the one hand and create an agricultural and industrial society on the other. The studies of pastoral nomadism proposed by Somali social scientists for IDRC support will not merely be passive notations on processes of social change. If carried out properly, they will serve to evaluate the effects and impact of the resettlement program on the nomads, their communities, and Somali society as a whole, in the hope that with the help of new knowledge, the nation's goals can be effectively achieved. □

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