



# The Land of Jilali: Travels Through Kenya's Drought-Stricken North

By Paul Goldsmith



As we zoom across the flat hardpan of the Chalbi desert, the sun is spreading its soft, brilliant blanket over the silhouette of Mt. Kulal. We pass small Rendille camels from the fora satellite camps, grazing in the twilight, unfazed by our speed. We are in no hurry, and on a twilight break we inspect the Chalbi's crusty, salt-impregnated surface. When precipitation exceeds evaporation, insoluble minerals and salts are leached out of the soil. Eons of rainfall have concentrated soda in the wind-scoured floor of this former inland sea. Once upon a time, this was a very lush land.

It is early June, 2000. Kenya is hurtling toward a massive combined crisis of power shortfalls, water rationing, and shrinking informal sector employment. The drought-crippled economy is fueling new and unique expressions of social tension: rioting school children in Nairobi capture a Tusker beer truck, and drink it dry.

But we are far from Nairobi. Out of the desert we suddenly enter glades of stunted doum palm. We have arrived in Maikona, a small collection of houses that in the glimmer of early starlight seem to have sprouted mushroom-like out of the Chalbi's sun-baked mud. A small crowd gathers. Over a plate of leathery meat I ask, "*Habari ya Maikona?*" "*Jilali tu*", is the reply. (What news of Maikona? ... Drought, only.) A hyena crosses our path on its way out of town.

On our way here we passed through Isiolo, immediately after the clashes there between the Waso Borana and the Degodia Somali. These cattle people were fighting over land rights; others are invading Laikipia ranches in search of grass. Here, in the distant north, the camel herding populations tread the thin line between survival and *jilali*-induced disaster.

*Jilali* describes the conditions in the rangeland of Marsabit after the rains have failed for the third straight season. Isiolo and Laikipia look lush in comparison. "Since El Nino," people tell us, "it has only rained once, for a few hours." Pressing on, we re-enter the Chalbi and proceed to Kalacha. As I discover during the coming days, the landscape appears far less bleak in the cool, muted light of night.

## **Gabrastan**

The Gabra people range into Ethiopia, but their main settlements are located on the edge of the Chalbi for the simple reason that this is where the most permanent water sources are found. Since 1971, each successive *jilali* has forced more nomads to settle around these springs.

Pastoral dropouts are swelling the size of Kenya's desert towns. Relief food provides the pull; loss of their herds exerts the push. This demographic shift is presumed to be driving environmental degradation. Fuelwood consumption is depleting tree cover around settlements; the herds of the settled degrade forage resources beyond the zone of naked plain. Actually, things have been going downhill since *Homo sapiens* crawled out of a local hole 1.8 million years ago.

Downtown Kalacha is a wide avenue of desert separating lines of modest houses and shops, giving way to tiny suburbs of traditional huts interspersed with the occasional block of more modern "maisonettes". Kalacha is sandwiched between the Chalbi and a barren expanse of lava rock that we will later cross on the way to Badhahurri. Decapitated stumps of *Acacia tortillis* along the roadside appear to confirm the human-impact hypothesis.

A mother and daughter talk to us as they make final adjustments on their load camels. The men have headed north in search of grazing. KARI research officer Godana Jilo Doyo remarks that the Gabra art of packing one's worldly possessions on a camel—a scene reproduced on Kenya's fifty shilling notes—is a disappearing tradition. The two camel, two women caravan sets off, perhaps for good, for Kalacha, forty kilometers of rocks and boulders away.

We continue on toward Badhahurri. Outrageously spindled *Acacia seyal* trees mark the approach to the Hurri Hills. The track rising from the desert pavement transits a series of small valleys. The hills on either side are tapered cones with uniformly scalloped windward slopes. Gravel and boulders segue into a dirty carpet of cropped brown grass as we pass through overlapping ecologies.

A few cows lounge inside a copse of *Erythrina burtii*, gnarled and deeply grooved trees closely related to *E. africana*, whose bright red-orange flowers add a dash of color across Kenya's central highlands. On the high plateau of Badhahurri, the area's dusty rain catchment, naked plots attest to the severity of the drought.

Several hundred Borana and Konso agropastoralists, immigrants here from the escarpment beyond Ferole, occupy scattered human settlements. Kulal, the sacred mountain of the Gabra, is a jagged silhouette marking the Kenya-Ethiopia border. This fairy-tale landscape is otherwise protected by its total absence of water; there is nothing here to fight over.

## **The Sands of Horr**

Ubiquitous rocks and boulders are the principle feature distinguishing Gabrastan from Rendille

country, whose sands and intermittent stretches of gravel support significantly more bush and trees. North Horr, however, is the rockless and sandy exception; shifting dunes threaten to engulf the town. North Horr's periphery is devoid of trees and grass except for patches of the evergreen *Sueada monica*, which form a barrier of sorts against the Chalbi.

Average rainfall here is 150 mm per year, compared with 800 mm for Nairobi in a very dry year, and the soil is extremely alkaline, with a pH between 9.5 and 10.5. Not ideal tree-planting conditions, but this is what a local women's group is doing. One fenced-in enclosure protects a few dry sticks. But another *boma* shows off a mix of *Salvadora persica* (the *mswaki* or toothbrush tree), *Acacia tortillis*, and *Azadirachta indica* (neem)-most of which are flourishing. Women arrive during the late afternoon, each carrying a pair of one litre containers of precious water to share with their personal plants. Why did the plot next door fail? "Improper organisation." Will their twice-daily devotion make a difference? It's hard to say. On the other side of town another enclosure houses a small community of coconut palms. They are several feet high, and if they make it to maturity it may mark the start of a new agro-industry.

We depart. The vegetation begins to improve on the track south. One of our riders tells us about his life with the Dassenech, who snatched him from his Gabra manyatta at a tender age. He escaped back to his people many years later, and now runs a shop in the small oasis of Gas, on the southern fringe of Gabrastan.

## Loyangelani

I last visited Loyangelani in 1976. During the interim, Loyangelani has evolved from a hamlet of drought refugees into a tourist town on the shores of the Jade Sea. Now it is a cosmopolitan community of Rendille, Samburu, El Molo, and growing numbers of Turkana taking the place of the Luo fishermen who have shifted to the Lake's west coast. This port could support a lucrative fishing industry.

A tan and slender European, escorted by several uncircumcised boys, walks his heavily panniered mountain bike up the main drag. He is Dutch. He began his journey in India; South Africa is his destination. Asia was easy, he says, but the heat nearly killed him in Sudan, and Ethiopia tested his limits. "It's good to be back in civilisation" (defined as food, water, and a common language) he tells us.

Gatab

On a landscape otherwise devoid of vegetation a Turkana boy tends a large herd of goats feeding on invisible shoots of *Spirobolus*, a spiky grass growing in the cracks between rocks. We leave the fortress-like walls of the Turkana escarpment behind and turn onto the road to Mt.

Kulal, which passes through richer country dotted with trees and grass cover, undisturbed due to insecurity.

In the past, raiding was rare during droughts; basic survival is an all-consuming task.

Driving weakened livestock across waterless countryside is a low percentage gambit; raiding after the onset of rain a conventional re-stocking technique. But the world is no longer normal; a Turkana raiding party successfully attacked a group of Samburu in this area several days ago.

The bandits came from distant Lokorio, perhaps the inhabitants of a recently abandoned Turkana manyatta we passed on our way.

At the Kenya Telkom relay station above the small plateau which is home to Gatab, Kulal's only permanent settlement, we listen to the President's Madaraka day speech, in which he tells the nation, "*Moi si mvua*" (Moi is not rain.) In the land of famine relief, rainmakers are redundant.

## **Kargi and Korr**

The Rendille are the true *wenyewe* of Marsabit District, by virtue of never having lived anywhere else. Their tenure in this exceedingly austere environment is the product of a resilient technological adaptation personified in the Rendille camel, a small but highly drought- and disease-resistant animal also herded by the Gabra. Though not prolific milkers, they boast attractive *anti-jilali* features, such as a narrow body profile designed to reduce radiation absorption in the absence of shade.

Marsabit's camel-centric communities' demographically-conservative strategy includes delayed age-set initiation, primogeniture favouring the first son, and a high canon of reles and centralised rituals. The cultural matrix makes for late marriage, smaller households, and in the case of the Rendille, a steady spin-off of individuals and groups responsible for the replication of their clans among the Gabra, Sakuye, and Somali Garre, Ajuran, and Degodia.

The Aerial embody the transitional dynamic. Rendille by origin, they have adopted Samburu ways and cattle, while living in symbiosis with both groups. The Gabra are allied to the Borana; the Turkana are allied to no one.

Modern change had overtaken traditional cultural strategies. The settlements of Korr and Kargi reveal the most advanced environmental degradation we have yet seen. Korr enjoys the dubious distinction of being one of the most widely cited examples of the process of desertification. Over a decade ago, Herlocker and Dierk noted in *The Marsabit Range Management Handbook* that in many places erosion had worn soils down to the bare underlying rock. There is a point where environmental degradation is irreversible.

The concept of non-equilibrium environments is the new orthodoxy in African range management. Simply stated, it holds that the vegetation change and erosion formerly attributed to pastoralists and their herds is actually insignificant over time, that ecological changes are more the product of long-term rainfall patterns.

Empirical studies of range conditions and stocking rates in this region support the thesis. But permanent settlement is another phenomenon: the pressure on forage and fuelwood has now extended the naked perimeter around Korr to a radius of ten kilometers.

## **Network Shungwaya**

Mobility has always been an important coping strategy in the face of environmental crisis. In Kalacha, I came across the following passage while rereading Gunther Schlee's brilliant work on proto-Rendille Somali clans, *Identities on the Move*.

"One group [of the Garre] moved to Gumbo, near the mouth of the river Juba, but after being repeatedly attacked were forced to cross the river and eventually moved north to Merca. A second group of Garre moved to the coast and then crossed to the Dendas Islands where they sought the protection of the Bajuni and were eventually absorbed by them."

On the same page, Schlee quotes a document from the Kenya National Archives which says that these "refugees" came from the Banna sections of the Garre, lending support to Jim Allen's interpretation of the Shungwaya legend.

Allen hypothesizes that Shungwaya, the homeland once shared by the Bajuni, Miji Kenda, and Segeju, was not the capital of an ancient multi-ethnic kingdom as depicted in oral history. Rather, he marshals archaeological and linguistic evidence showing that Shungwaya was actually the hub of a trade network linking early Swahili settlements to areas of the interior as far inland as Lake Turkana. Artifacts not found anywhere else connect the distant interior to ancient Baghdad and Cairo. Satellite photography shows that the Uaso Nyiro river once reached the coast, entering the sea through the channels of Mongoni and Dodori. Have water, will travel.

The people of Lamu town used to perform an annual ritual of purification called *kuzungusha ng'ombe*. A cow is led through the town's streets, prayers are recited, the animal is sacrificed and the meat roasted for a public feast. During a visit to Lamu last year, we were discussing the petty political infighting responsible for the community's disunity when I commented that perhaps the *kuzungusha ng'ombe* ceremony should be revived. A Bajuni friend responded that they had in fact performed a *sorio* only a few weeks before.

I double-check to make sure he really used this proto-Rendille cultural term for the important ritual in which dispersed herders gather at a central location and sacrifice an animal to invoke blessings for the community. Different communities now associated with the Borana and Somali still perform it, albeit cloaked in Islamic garb. The Bajuni-Shungwaya-Proto Rendille Somali link is just one variation on the precolonial pattern: almost every Kenyan tribe is composed of multi-cultural clans on the move.

### **Forward to the Past**

In late June, the team returns to Kalacha for the KARI/Marsabit field station annual review.

We stay in several tourist bandas gracefully nestled among the doum palms that mark the spring. The ruffling (racket to some) of the palms I have come to associate with the oasis at night is interrupted by the yipping of a hyena, a voice that can agitate penned-up animals until they stampede.

Blustery wind and an overcast sky above the white sands give the following early morning landscape an oddly wintry cast. Could even the most brilliant of team scientists, operating with unlimited resources, devise technological alternatives approaching the complex of finely tuned resource management and cultural systems of the pastoralists who have survived and flourished in this impossible environment? No, they can only expand on it.

The traditional system included critical mechanisms for keeping population inline with carrying capacity. Though the more expansionary proclivities of cattle people contrast with the conservative strategies of the Rendille and Gabra, in the end the result was roughly the same: small populations. But in modern Kenya, small populations mean social exclusion, the continuing post-*Uhuru* marginalisation of many northern and coastal communities.

Large-scale famine relief first appeared during the drought of 1971, and each successive *jilali* has quickened the rate of change and the number of pastoralists dropping out of the livestock economy. This time around, even the husky local camels are already dying, and the worst is yet to come.

Kenya's poorest districts are the ones where today's indigenous peoples were confined to ghettos by *laissez faire* colonial policy. Our verdict: the problem is not so much environmental degradation as a lack of economic diversification. There are untapped resources in these remote regions, including nutrient-rich salt from the Chalbi, gum arabic, stunning landscapes for the high-end adventure tourist. But exploiting them has been constrained by a combination of poor infrastructure,

restrictive laws, a lack of services, and the social prejudice engendered by separation. Isolation has bred war parties that roam the land with the unpredictability of rain-bearing clouds.

The trajectory of modernisation-for farmer, forager, fisherman, and herder alike-involves migration, settlement, and diversification of livelihood. As towns grow, degradation of the peri-urban fringe paves the way for expansion. Tree cover improves within the new pastoralist settlements even as it is denuded without. Tree planting, unless for generating future income, is unlikely to solve the environmental crisis.

The Borana recall two famines of decades past by the blueflies that swarmed over the cattle, both dead and alive. Perhaps the system-level impact of the *jilali*, underscoring the national crisis of planning and resource management, will be reforms that promote the comparative advantage of cultural diversity, like the Shungwayan example. Kenyans, despite some parties' best efforts to prove otherwise, are poor tribalists simply because, over the long-run, the environment selects against it. The drought has exposed the futility of petty local agendas.

Our landrover dies in the Chalbi night. A jury-rigged repair gets us moving again. A hyena slinks across the track as we approach Kargi, where we diagnose the problem-a faulty wire to the fuel pump. Two cheetah streak across the desert rocks as we approach Marsabit mountain in the early morning light. I see my first bluefly.

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