

The Lineage Based Company

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (December 2022)



Two Camels and a Dromedary, Paul Klee, 1919

"This," said the poet, "is the life which has often been celebrated for its innocence and quiet; let us pass the heat of the day among the shepherds' tents and know whether our searches are not to terminate in pastoral simplicity."—Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, *A Glimpse of the Pastoral Life*

I spent five years in northern Kenya, a vast and wonderful acacia tree desert. It has bare wastes and stony plains, punctuated by green forested mountains, still home to the African wildlife that has all but disappeared in the plains of this once rich ecosystem. The plains are now the home a group of diverse pastoral tribes with remarkably different cultures and language, Nilotic and Cushitic.

As a development anthropologist I was once hired to evaluate a camel development project, funded by the Canadian government and implemented by a British NGO. I then, for the UN, I worked on an "indigenous" method for project evaluation that highlighted the perceptions of the largely non literate tribal people who have been the beneficiaries and sometimes the victims of the good intentions of donors and development projects.

In northern Kenya, the camel and cattle trade are dominated by Somali traders who with their extended lineages that spread across northern Kenya, the meat markets in Nairobi, across Somalia and all the way to Arabia which received over a million camels annually from Somali peoples across the Horn of Africa. The tribes who supply them with this livestock have usually been those who are non-literate and outside the wide market networks of Somali or East Indian traders who dominate the mid-level trade of East Africa and the horn. And so, having spent so much time with the camel herding Rendille

tribe of northern Kenya I came up with an idea that donors and NGOs could support to give these people a greater share of the rewards of their pastoralism through what I call "The Lineage Based Company."

I argue that the assisted development of companies, manned and managed by members of related families, or lineages, among the pastoral nomads of Northern Kenya is a realistic and effective way of insuring that these people can sell surplus animals for money, make a profit and reinvest their profits in their business and community.

It follows from the observation that the 'Asian Industrial Miracle' has had much to do with the fact that key industrial and trading concerns were begun, manned by and continued to be manned by people who are related by creed, lineage and common regional origins such as the Chinese expatriate communities of Southeast Asia and Indonesia.

It is based on the observation that Western development organizations interested in stimulating commerce in Africa, often subscribe to a model of entrepreneurship that is based on 'ideal' individuals and ideal 'contracting individuals' and that such a model is inappropriate for African social contexts. Instead, it is here suggested that a much-modified version of the 'Asian family business' that is built around an extended family, is more appropriate to African conditions.

The development of the lineage-based company is based on the fact that the mutual reciprocity, trust and risk taking that is a common feature of lineages who live, migrate and herd together should not be dismantled so that the, 'entrepreneuring individual' can be found and supported.

Instead, it assumes that such 'entrepreneuring' individuals are interested in channeling their drive for profit through the social forms that they live within. By doing so, the lineage-based company can function in such a way that it

markets surplus livestock from the arid north to the southern regions of Kenya and beyond, where demand for the meat of goat, sheep, cattle and camels is growing daily.

The development, financing and monitoring of such a lineage-based company, if successful, could revolutionize donor attitudes and assistance to herding peoples living in desert conditions. By doing so it would, for the first time, provide the financial means by which peoples affected by desertification could regain responsibility for their own lives by bettering their economic position. And, if such a model is successful it could change the models of development intervention amongst nomadic peoples from Dakar to Djibouti.

Let me take a dull step backwards and share some of my own experiences of "pastoral development." For those who have access to C.I.D.A's mid term evaluation of the British Ngo Farm Africa's Pastoral Development Project for the nomads of Northern Kenya (1993), it is clear that they still live in a time of growing populations and dwindling resources, punctuated by recurrent famines and dependance on famine relief. If there ever was a time of 'pastoral simplicity' then we see no traces of it in contemporary northern Kenya.

The CIDA project did much to help the pastoralists gain a better understanding of their problems and prospects through their Mobile Outreach Camps and through the establishment of the Camel Improvement Groups.

Thus, in the evaluation it was recommended that the project should do three things to remedy this situation:

- Encourage "camel interest groups" to include contingency plans for drought periods in their discussions and activities and to split into self-help and entrepreneurial sections.
- Build linkages between traditional pastoralists and commercial ranch operators to explore the possibilities

of camel dairies and look into the development of camel markets.

- Procure and distribute basic business literature that teach how to write a business plan in order to formalize groups that want to sell their livestock in ways that follow international and Kenyan business procedures, if they are to succeed.

Such recommendations took into account the evaluator's comments which suggested that:

- Some tribes do better than others given the same stimulus.
- Cultural differences are the root cause.
- Donors and project directors must decide who is to be served and to what degree, on an ethical and political basis.

It was thus clear to the evaluators that those tribes closest to the market economy did better than those farthest from it. However, the tribes farthest from the market economy, and least familiar with its opportunities were in the most need and are in need of the most development assistance. One of these groups, which was at a low level in the learning curve, is the Ariaal, a mixed Samburu/Rendille speaking group who live in the Kaisut desert just east of the Ndoto mountains.

The Ariaal, and probably many other pastoral nomadic groups like them across the Sahel, have experienced, in a concentrated and non-representative way, that comparatively small part of the modern economy that deals with international charity. The reader should be reminded, regardless of his or her ideological disposition, that charity has not been the engine which has driven the modern international economy.

For more than forty years now the Ariaal have seen and experienced a large number of different foreigners who have

come to live and work among them, mostly Europeans. From the Ariaal point of view, they come equipped with what looks like inexhaustible resources (food, medicine, money, vehicles and temporary housing), with large operating budgets and without the Ariaal having a clear idea of where this wealth comes from or, more importantly, what kind of activities generate this wealth.

The catch in the story is that their appreciation of this 'manna from heaven' is similar to that described by researchers who have investigated the bizarre religious sects in the Pacific called 'cargo cults.' These cults emerged after WWII among indigenous Pacific Island peoples, who had never seen the material source of the American soldier and his elaborate and well-stocked military bases. When the soldiers left and the bases were closed, instead of learning about commerce and manufacturing, the local people engaged in rituals that imitated the actions of the soldiers and that they believed would 'bring back the cargo.'



The Ariaal have not reached this point, but if they and other peoples like them continue to receive development assistance, which is largely charitable in its source and nature, one day we can expect bizarre social reactions if the donors and churches have to pull out of the arid north. Ariaal often speak of individuals who, 'bring a project' or complain about those who promised them one and did not fulfill the promise. But to better understand the predicament of pastoral development one must also grasp the real anxiety that the Ariaal and most other African pastoralists now live with, in order to appreciate the need for bold thinking and innovation in this sector of development.

There are three reasons for Ariaal anxiety. The first is the inevitability of drought and the possibility of starvation. The second is their inevitable dependence on outsiders to give them enough food to get through the drought. The third is the inconsistent behavior of the different agencies that work

among them, that is the NGOs.

If you move through northern Kenya and ask different groups, as I have, simple questions about NGOs, for e.g., where do they get their money from and who they are, most people do not know the answer. Nor, are they clear about what are the NGOs' goals and rules of operation. In addition, there is a fair amount of inconsistency in NGOs which perplexes the Ariaal and others. For example, in many projects one day there is food for work and soon after there is free food without work. On this basis alone it would be fair to say that the level of trust between the NGOs and the Ariaal is not high.

The Ariaal hope that the NGOs, being representatives of sympathetic outsiders, have similar values as they do, and that one day they will coordinate their activities. This has not been the case so far.

For those who work in the world of drought and pastoral development it is well known that NGOs sometimes act like a modern form of a hunter-gatherer band: They hunt for scarce donor assistance and gather their clients in the bush. Therefore the Ariaal see that in the field, as NGOs do not coordinate their activities and this makes them more aware that the outside world may have fewer good intentions towards them than they may have once thought.

One Ariaal man who is aware of much of the above and who has much experience working with NGOs in his home area and in other parts of Kenya. He conducted an experiment.

Over the years he had asked me what could be done to improve his immediate well-being without immediately involving outside organizations. I suggested that the means now existed for him to gather a 'surplus' of animals from his lineage and clan, give them the appropriate drugs on the spot to clean them up, get them ready for sale down country, then rent a lorry, run the gauntlet, take them to Nairobi and make the

sale.

Although the narrative of his experience is interesting from a number of perspectives, to make a long story short, this is what he did. The important thing to note is that he managed to turn a profit from the deal. Now, that profit went back into the traditional economy. It was not invested and his 'company' did not grow. Nor did the Ariaal gain the equivalent of what one could playfully call 'a tax base' or 'community chest' from which to pay for social services on the basis of such a commercial exchange.

This successful experiment persuaded me that the camel improvement groups of the Farm Africa project, and which were often made up of partly related but often unrelated members, could emerge as entrepreneurial groups, if, donors would act less charitably towards them and more like investors in and trainers of 'lineage-based companies. As a result, a potentially lucrative avenue of local development could evolve in the area.

Based partly on local conditions and on the imitation of the family-and-lineage-based companies that have fuelled the recent 'economic miracle of East Asia' (and the Indian based extended lineage family businesses of Kenya and East Africa) our informant proved that they could be replicated in a smaller way among Africa's nomads. In our discussions he said that what he was lacking was capital, access to regular transport and more importantly, an understanding of how businesses work on paper as well as an understanding of the nature of the East African livestock market.

Together, we discussed the possible models of the lineage-based company and listed some of its features.

The lineage-based company would first and foremost be just that, a company, registered formally and with a goal-to sell surplus livestock at a profit.

It would be owned in different degrees by members of a lineage interested in risking involvement in the surplus livestock economy. And it would be limited to members of that lineage or related group of lineages.

It would be largely driven by those young, literate school educated members of Ariaal society, who although they are more worldly than the non literate elders, do not have the resources to set up their own businesses. By acting as a company, it could attract financing and expertise from donors and banks and develop a business plan for the successful sale of livestock.

Despite the fact that not all members would participate or benefit equally, one key condition of donor assistance would be that some profits are reinvested in both the business and in community services such as water, education and health-in a kind of lineage-based community chest.

This company would harness the deskilled but highly motivated members of the society who want to stay in their home area but who also want to raise their standards of living. By being a company with a board of directors it could grow and would benefit from `down country` management and flows of information.

If it `took off,` it would provide a model for other lineages.

The lineage-based company is based on the assumption that the livestock economy has a potential to grow, and that the demand for meat in the region and for export will also grow. Finally, if the company makes money, it can store food locally and thus be in a better position to cull herds while waiting for the next drought to pass and without immediately depending on NGOs for desperately sought food supplies.

The first advantage of the lineage-based company is that it starts from individuals who want to break out of the traditional system. Individuals such as the one just

described above are not alone, but they do constitute a minority. They are 'indigenous entrepreneurs,' but at the same time they are largely bound up with traditional social organization and values. The lineage-based company would be formed for a group of people who already work and live together and therefore trust each other.

The 'culture of development' has until recently been biased in favor of the majority, based on the charitable notion that we must help as many people as possible escape death from hunger – a common problem still faced by the dryland pastoralists of Asia and Africa, and which will confront the development community during coming droughts. Thus, many NGOs have concentrated on food relief.

Such an approach makes the creation of wealth very difficult. The history of Western commerce and the dramatic rise of East Asia shows that it is innovators and not traditionalists, who have managed to create enough wealth to reduce the spread of poverty effectively.

The second advantage of this approach is that it puts pastoralists, NGOs and development organizations in a position of practical partnership, similar to the relation between a bank and the recipient of a mortgage. The bank ideally prefers that the client buys the house, and the client uses the financing provided by the bank to establish and maintain an independent household, rather than taking the house as collateral.

Here the metaphor breaks down because so far donors have not let pastoralists starve. However, a decline in development assistance across the board, or a worldwide food shortage due to global weather fluctuations, could have grievous consequences for pastoralists as today East African and the Horn is in the grip of one of those recurring droughts.

Third the establishment of the lineage-based company allows

committed outsiders to be drawn in from other parts of the country and from overseas to act literally and metaphorically as 'members of the board' and, as technical advisors to the company, in order to create the wealth necessary for the social services the pastoralists need and want: food security, medicine, new equipment and techniques.

The conditions of funding such a company in its initial stages would be contingent upon these companies donating a certain percentage of their profits to the financing of services for their families, lineages, and clans and who now value many of the 'the good things in life' (medicine, education etc.) as they are coming to see it. Otherwise, a donor agency in this instance would be funding the growth of social inequality amongst peoples who are quite egalitarian.

Such an approach creates interdependence, not dependence. From an outsider's point of view what we call interdependence could in its initial stages fit into the 'generosity world view' of people like the Ariaal, (that is who gives the most is best) until such time that the generation of revenue itself acts to persuade them that there is a third way to sustainability, one that steers a course between starvation and charity. 'Generosity' is probably the point of entry but profit will soon become the goal.

The success of one lineage-based company among the Ariaal would in itself be the most effective form of public education in directed social change among pastoralists. If successful others would want to form their own companies.

Finally, such an approach would link the arid north of Kenya with the more advanced and commercially developed south of the country which, when one looks at it, happens to be already filled with family, lineage and clan-based companies, many of which are very successful and totally ignored by the "development community"

The scenario described here, that of northern/southern, pastoral/agricultural, subsistence/commercial contrast is a common phenomenon found amongst most Sahelian countries and is not a problem that is only found in Kenya. It is worth trying.

Table of Contents

Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)