

The Wizard of Lake Turkana

by Geoffrey Clarfield (August 2014)



From 1988 until 1990 I was based in the district capital of Lodwar on the west side of Lake Turkana, in northern Kenya. Turkana district is a dry land, mountainous in some areas, cross cut by seasonal rivers and forested riversides. It is populated by one Nilotic speaking tribe, the Turkana, who wandered south into this semi-desert, many centuries ago. When I lived among them, now more than a quarter of a century ago, a few of them had taken on the modern, slightly westernized life style of “down country,” that is, of the southern Kenyans. Most lived a traditional tribal life. And so early in my stay I visited parts of the district with an English-speaking colleague. The following are my impressions from that first excursion out of the regional capital. At the time I sent them to a colleague who was the *Washington Post* reporter in Kenya. She liked the piece very much and I left it at that. At the time I had no idea that I would ever publish these notes. Now is the time.

The Turkana people are a thin, Nilotic speaking group of agro cattle pastoralists who came down from the Nile, centuries ago and who herd their cattle and tend their farms to the west of the alkaline desert lake that lies in Kenya’s northwestern desert once called Lake Rudolph and then called Lake Turkana. Oddly it was “discovered” by Europeans in the late 19th century, by an expedition under the auspices of an Austro Hungarian count who happens to be the great, great uncle of a close family friend.

The home of the Turkana is a place of wide plains, covered with acacia trees, seasonal rivers fringed by doum palms and abrupt outcrops of rocky hills and mountains that give you the feeling of living on the surface of Mars. Once full of wildlife it is still home to hundreds of bird species, pythons, gazelle and the occasional lion and elephant.

Although the sky is often pure blue or pock marked with cumulus clouds before the rains, Turkana country is a cascade of dark reds and browns and punctuated with similarly colored ant hills (really locust hives) that often tower 18 feet above the ground, and look as if they are mileposts designed and maintained by insects.

Many of the Turkana women still dress in animal skins. The men often drape a colored blanket from their shoulders across their stomach, which reminds one of Roman togas or Scottish blankets. Or sometimes they will just walk around their homesteads naked or near naked. The

men wear razor sharp wrist knives, carry spears and guns and use mud to sculpt their hair into a variety of styles that are unique to this ethnic group. The men herd their cattle while the women take care of sheep and goats.

Despite their known, ferocity and lack of mercy when raiding other tribes, the domestic Turkana homestead is a comparative oasis of peace. For the Turkana murder means killing another Turkana and this is frowned upon, whereas killing an enemy is not murder in their eyes, just a way of increasing their livestock through raiding, violence and warfare.

Although both Protestant and Catholic missionaries have been active there for more than fifty years, and many Turkana now profess Christianity, the majority are still pagan, they believe in their one God, ancestral spirits as well as a host of other ill-defined spirit beings. They are gifted dancers and singers, know their environment inside out and cultivate an aggressive, independent attitude towards all outsiders. When the civil wars of Uganda and the Southern Sudan have sent waves of refugees, both armed and unarmed, into their traditional homeland, they have more than held their own.

From 1988-1990 I lived among the Turkana. Admittedly I was based in a simple house with water and electricity in the administrative capital of Lodwar, but as I was training young bilingual Turkana in the basics of ethnographic fieldwork, I would often visit my students in the bush, embedded in their traditional communities.

It is easy to fall into neo-Marxist or materialist descriptions and explanations of Turkana traditional life, finding complex reasons for why things are the way they are and then giving neo-Darwinian, or cultural ecological explanations of why that may be. And so during my sojourns among the Turkana I was on the lookout for social or cultural phenomena that did not fit into the neat paradigms of the development thinkers or the cultural ecologists. Early in my stay I found one, a wizard, a man to whom the Turkana turned to for supernaturally based advice and who had become rich in the process, having many, many wives who lived in a string of huts that itself comprised a small village. I decided that one day I would visit him.

In 1988, two years before the end of the Cold War, Lodwar was a bustling town that gave me the feeling of being in a frontier town in the American Southwest during the 1880s but with an African flavor. Walking down any street you would see Turkana women in their skin dresses with remarkable punk style hairdos, heads shaved on either side with braided locks coming down from the scalp. The women would carry everything on their heads with grace and dignity, constantly swaying back and forth under the weight of their loads in dramatic contrast to the labored way that the Bantu women of the Mount Kenya region would struggle with theirs.

Elders and warriors would walk the streets carrying clubs and spears with the inevitable red and yellow striped Raymond Safari blankets that they purchased in town, worn like short togas, contrasted with their mud caked hairdo, itself supporting an upright feather that often symbolized which generation set they were born into and belonged to, either "leopards" or "stones." Their warrior's club is gently curved, made out of local trees and shaped like an exaggerated hip bone, which is probably what it was once modeled on, way back when, millennia ago, when the ancestors of the Turkana once wandered with their cattle across the humid and once well watered plains of what is now the Sahara desert, before its great desiccation some three thousand to four thousand years ago.

Intermingled with the crowds that cross over the Turkwell River, a broad river that was flowing fast that year, because of freak, continuous and unexpected rainfall, I would see young schoolboys and girls going to their primary schools, most often barefoot but in their blue skirts, shorts and shirts, a vestige of the British colonial presence in this now independent African country. There they would become literate in Swahili and English, learn about the wider world, imbibe a world religion and by doing so end their connection to the spirit world of their parents and ancestors.

Small numbers of Somali merchants had established their presence in town as traders, and every once in a while I would be riveted to the spot watching a Somali woman, in her multi-colored robes and shawl, walking languidly down the street, dark eyes sparkling as she moved slowly, fully aware that all eyes were on her and that in her and everyone else's estimate, she was clearly more beautifully clothed than were the near naked tribal women among whom she found herself.

Somali men would wear kikois, wrap around pieces of manufactured cloth often from Indonesia, with turbans that resembled the head dresses of the traditional Bedouin of the Arabian deserts. These Somali are part of a wider and longer movement of commercial and demographic penetration of northern Kenya from the original homes in the Somali part of the Horn of Africa, always moving into "greener pastures" as either traders or herders, marrying local women who convert to Islam and slowly growing in numbers and influence.

The former British governor of Tanganyika, Sir Richard Turnbull, and a former Northern Kenya man (NFD-Northern Frontier province) once described them as part of the "Darod Invasion," a slow and often violent movement of Somali peoples into what is now Kenya from their desert homes in the northeast of the Horn. (Decades later, the partial results of that demographic shift were seen in Al Shabaab's attack on an upscale shopping mall in downtown Nairobi).

Lodwar city itself is spread out in various directions on either side of the Turkwell River, a river that could easily be the scene of one of those old Bogart films where some white Western explorer or adventurer tries to make it back to the trading post from where he disappeared, months before in the wilderness. The bridge that connects the two sides affords a view high above the seething brown waters where one can see the riverine forest surrounding both sides of the river, a kilometer or sometimes two kilometers wide in some of its widest stretches. The riverine forest is covered with acacia trees with their upturned umbrella like branches and green leaves. In some places, doum palms stretch out as far as the eye can see.

Nearby Turkana have built their doum palm thatched beehive huts so that they can be closer to town. The houses are woven from the leaves of the tree and branches and trunks of the tree are used like pillars to keep the structure upright. The fruit of the doum palm is edible and tastes like a rustic cousin of the sophisticated Middle Eastern date. During one of my periodic walks through a riverside doum side forest I once ran into two Turkana children busily shaking doum palms and eating the fruit with gusto. I would occasionally eat them. I found them somewhat bitter to the palate but all in all a pleasant tasting fruit with a leathery exterior and pulpy interior. On the other side of Lake Turkana the Rendille tribe also eat it as it can be found on both sides of the Lake.

The heart of Lodwar town is another mixture of tradition and modernity. The same elders and warriors walk down the unpaved and dusty main street beside the Kenya Post and Telecommunications Office, clothing stores, grocers, cheap hotels and tea shops, a cassette store and the relatively well kept and clean looking Turkana Pharmacy where prescriptions can be filled. Here one can see the rounder faces of down country entrepreneurs, men and women from the Bantu speaking regions of Meru and Mount Kenya, and the southern Nilotes from the region of Kitale, a region that is modernizing at an incredibly quick rate due to the resources that those on top have been able to direct towards their tribal homelands.

When I drove through the mountains and alpine forest of Kitale, hundreds of kilometers south of the Turkana district, I noticed that there was rarely a pot hole, the roads were well maintained and the electricity and telephone lines were set on their poles straight as arrows for hundreds of kilometers. The Kikuyu of Mount Kenya complain that the plains Nilotes are being excessively favoured, which within an ideal national framework is probably true. However it is a mere circulation of tribal elites monopolizing resources flowing into the country and strengthening their position *vis à vis* the other tribes and regions. I strongly believe that if the Kikuyu regain power they will be no different as they used to use the regime to favor their homeland when they were the dominant national political power.

I have been to many meetings introducing my project and find that it is a psychological relief to say that the data to be collected is of the people for the people and by the people. If more anthropological research was channeled through regional museums, we might be liked more in rural Africa. However anthropologists specialize in telling the ethnographic truth which in these days of "development" is anathema to most modernizing Africans.

Somehow the missionaries got them as is shown by the signs in the hotels in town ("Do not take pictures of the local inhabitants") There is a great shame among Kenyans toward their traditional culture with only a few exceptions. (I have met the D.C., the D.O., the various ministries, Education, Culture and Social Services, Adult Education, always leaving my two page project synopsis behind. The more people who know me the better. But when I see the drab offices, the newspeak which is so much part of life here and the non conversations about chasing women at hotels and expensive restaurants in Nairobi, I feel that the espoused virtues of development are hardly worth the sacrifice of the unworldly, traditional societies like the Turkana. As Justin once said centuries ago, 'So far has ignorance of vice been more advantageous to the Scythians than knowledge of virtue to the Greeks.'

In fifty years time Kenya will most likely be an overpopulated country of forty million, relatively impoverished farmers and herdsmen, wearing shabby second hand Western clothes, belonging to outlandish Independent African churches with millennial eschatologies that lead nowhere and I, in my eighties will lament the passing of traditional Africa. My photos, recordings and notes will give my grandchildren the kind of thrill that I still get when reading of the explorers who passed by Lake Turkana in the eighteen eighties, when there were hippos at every point on the shore and rhinos at every turn in the path.

The absurdity of much rural development work in this part of the world was brought home to me by an anecdote told to me by a Danish male nurse, Eric, working for the TRP and who had done good work getting food out to the nomadic communities during the last drought and who had stayed on to do preventative work and community health. Of course, one must work with the people so there are endless meetings and meetings about meetings and then of course further meetings. At least this preserves the traditional art of African oratory, an art long dead in the West.

One of the chiefs (government appointed 'leaders' of the rural tribes) was at a meeting about pit latrines. In the past there had been "food for work" programs and a variety of incentives had been given to the pastoralists to accustom them to jobs that were outside of the traditional division of labour. Well, this meeting concerned pit latrines. The idea had been agreed to at many an open air meeting (*baraza* in Swahili). Pit latrines were a good idea. One

could not just go anywhere, especially in a community that was no longer completely nomadic. Yes, people were aware (just how much I do not know) that it was unhealthy not to use them, but still, no one was using them. My Danish acquaintance was frustrated at the lack of movement (no pun intended) on the issue finally turned to a trusted chief with the improbable name of Jackson (probably a Salvation Army convert) who asked with great resentment in his voice, "Are women being given food for using the pit latrines?"

But of course if the good-hearted Danes and the Calvinist secular altruism of the Norwegians, who were in full force around there then, were to go away there would be other donors. The British High Commissioner arrived for an unannounced visit to set up another unannounced visit for Sir George something or other, the then current British Foreign Minister. The High Commissioner left behind a few brand new Land Rovers in his wake, free of charge (but receiver beware, batteries are not included, that is to say the spare parts have to be bought in hard currency and imported from the UK) because in many cases the real goal of aid is trade and in the long run, may not be such a bad thing. Which makes me think that in many instances aid can act like an iatrogenic disease. Those who think they need the aid, which is another kind of greed, (I am sure that Aristotle had something to say about this in the *Nicomachean ethics*) are in a sense aid junkies and are inadvertently joining the West and partaking of the joys of the throwaway society. It is thought that, if the jeep is not maintained we can always beg a new one from the British, or the Japanese or the Americans.

Which has forced me to conclude that development as it is now practiced is ecologically destructive. The paradox is frightening: the cultural content of traditional societies is often irrational, at odds with reality, nature, etc. A good example: if a Turkana gets a disease, a simple parasite that he picked up at a local well, it could be treated with a simple antibiotic, but the Turkana believes that he is sick because he slept with his cousin's wife and since this is proscribed behavior, he feels that this is his punishment. No one here would think that this is a case of irrational, primitive thought (except for those modernized and Westernized Kenyans who speak like this all the time). But wait a minute; it just may be that these kind of random and repeating instances of self-inflicted death, in the long term, keep the numbers of the community in a reasonable balance with the environment. Perhaps there is an ecology to consciously help irrational beliefs.

But then look at the West. We know that there is a parasite and we treat it. We unlock the secrets of the atom and pour more chemical waste into the one global environment that we have and the result of all of this high tech is ecological disaster. So the Turkana have irrational beliefs that engender rational ecological balance and we have yet to get out of this paradox and I believe it is to be the central issue in anthropology and the human sciences. Let us

formally call it "Clarfield's Paradox" in honour of that rather eccentric late twentieth century anthropologist who got the idea while squeezed between three chickens and a Kikuyu mama of about three hundred and fifty pounds in the middle of a traffic jam in a bus in downtown Nairobi, one that makes driving in Manhattan seem like a suburban luxury.

Tired of big city life in Lodwar I got into the jeep with my Rendille friend John and we drove out to the Lake, our destination the Fisherman's Lodge in Kalokol. Once out of town we were on a plain covered with green grass and of Turkana tribesmen a few hundred yards off the road, young boys with nothing but a piece of cloth and a herding stick coming up to camels five times their size and "thwack thwack" making sure that they keep to their grazing areas. Clouds in a blue sky, acacias in the distance, homesteads and herders, camels and then more of the same and every few hundred yards or so a beige coloured termites nests with a chimney like top, eight to fifteen feet high.

We arrived at the lodge late afternoon, having passed only one other vehicle and drove across Ferguson Gulf, a bay which only fifteen years ago was water and is now dry grassland, punctuated by groups of flamingoes in the small pools that were left here and there after the rains. The lodge is situated on a rise of sand and below it there is the lake wall, where ten years ago the water lapped at its white painted sides. Now there is only sand for half a kilometer down to the shore. The Lake is either fluctuating or drying up. But still it is enormous and one cannot see the northern end of the lake over the waters. At a certain point the sky and the water fuse and it is merely a water of differing shades of blue. On the other side are mountains, there is no sight of human habitation, no lights, no buildings, only hundreds of kilometers of lakeshore, mountains and the distant outlines of groups of trees.

I took a walk to the shore where Turkana were fishing with the aid of doum palm rafts, a few logs tied together and with nets. They were hauling in ten or fifteen large fish at the end of a day's work, Nile perch two feet long and what looked like a kind of sunfish. Nile perch came down the Nile three thousand years ago when Lake Turkana was still connected to the Nile. As the area became drier not only was the lake cut off from the Nile, but also the local flora and fauna retreated or stayed by the Lake. So there are still crocodiles around the edges of the Lake. They were not visible that day but fifty yards off shore there were five or six hippos lolling in the waters. Foreigners do not realize how quick and vicious these animals are and many a leg has been lost to their swift feet and fierce jaws. The Swahili word for hippo is "kiboko" which for me seems heavier and more substantial a word, reflecting the weight and power embodied in these animals.

There were few tourists on the beach and the young Turkana boys and girls were friendly and

playful, walking over to us and holding our hands. Tourism has yet to come here on a mass basis but one young boy wanted to give me his sister in exchange for the favors of my wife who was not present that day because he told me that "he liked white women." On the beach I ran into the local Bwana Mkubwa (big man in Swahili) from the Ministry of (mis) Information, whose friendly smiles hid God knows what (the smile may be universal but its function can certainly vary. In Kenya these days the smile is most often a mask trying to get the foreigner to reveal himself and give information, that may be of detriment to himself but of advantage to the Kenyan.

Mine is the smile of truths partially told. I have developed a repertoire of things to say and stories to tell which express my points of view on various subjects minus essential chunks. Perhaps this is hypocrisy. I do not think so. It dawned on me many years ago in Morocco. I woke up in the Moorish house that I was staying in in the old city of Marrakech and thought; "My God there are seventeen million Moroccans out there, inheritors of an Islamic Arab identity, who see the West and its humanism as a religious abomination. Is it my job to try and convince them of their intolerance?"

Likewise with the Kenyans, they are caught in a vice, between tradition and modernity. For them the Mazungu, the white man, is an expatriate, an outsider with a bigger salary, or he is thought of as a former colonialist, "oppressing the people" (who by the way hardly thought of themselves as the "people" but as Samburu, Rendille or Kikuyu which is still the case and the great problem of Kenyan unity).

On the other hand he is also the European missionary bringing the gospel, Christianity, goodness, truth and love.

The secular version are the development people, the secular missionaries who preach the gospel of progress, such as Goren Hyden, the economist who used to be head of the Ford Foundation's "mission" here who titled his most recent book, "No Easy Road to Progress"- what arrogance! So the persona of the Mazungu is charged with emotion. He is at one time the exploiter, the outsider, the stranger in a culture with very few rules of traditional toleration of outsiders and at the same time, a model, the one to emulate. Therefore any and almost all encounters between the Mazungu and African Kenyan are fraught with anxiety. Through the odd history of this part of the world the white man has been largely self selected; missionaries, colonial administrators of demonstrable virtue or at least expertise, and these are the experiences of most Kenyans with white men and women, people with above average skills, with access to wealth overseas, some with a reciprocal feeling of their superiority, many who would not have felt this way had not the environment dictated it. As the American novelist and travel writer Paul

Theroux once cynically put it, "Tarzan is an expatriate."

When I lived in Marsabit on the other side of the lake my wife and I got to know the DO (District Officer), a chap I will call Kamau. Kamau was in his late twenties, a handsome devil, and the kind that make Harry Belafonte plain by comparison. He was in great shape, a charming conversationalist, giving out a genuine smile. He had a large farm down country, a BA from the University of Nairobi and had volunteered for a stint in the Kenyan Army where he had done well.

We saw each other regularly and often spent time with other Kenyan administrators from "down country" (The people of Marsabit called going to Nairobi, "going to Kenya") drinking beer at bars in the evening and playing ping-pong. He would abstain from any alcoholic beverage and maintained his high spirits throughout the evening. I wondered to myself: his fiancé was beautiful, a woman from Meru, he is liked and respected, both a desk and field man, does not drink and still remains in high spirits? He told me that he had calculated how much he had saved by not drinking and bought himself a video player (one of the first VHS machines) and would invite other friends to watch films. I thought to myself, some people have it and some people don't.

There was a West African exchange teacher in town named Johnny, who I also befriended. He had studied in Europe but was never quite sure whether white people could be trusted. His girlfriend was an Irish volunteer from the UK, a good friend of my wife and I. Many months later I met him for coffee in a café in Nairobi.

He explained that as he had mastered Swahili and was an African, in Kenya the Kenyans did not give him the edited version of their lives. He heard it straight.

He told me that when we were in Marsabit, Kamau was carrying on with as many women as possible, while professing his love and loyalty to his fiancée and although he did not drink he did smoke marijuana on a daily basis. When I heard this I laughed and realized where Kamau's good mood came from, as it seemed to be renewed on a daily basis. Oh, I forgot to add that Kamau was also a devout Seventh Day Adventist and used to give sermons every Saturday morning in the local church, charged up with Biblical fervor and talking about honesty, fidelity and moderation.

Kamau could not get the "mazungu" out of his head and when we were together had been clearly performing for the missionary that he mistakenly projected onto foreigners like me. As a Canadian who had been brought up in Toronto where it was acceptable to be Jewish (as long as in those days you did not bring too much attention to it, which I realized was a classically

Anglo-Canadian way of turning it into a mild stigma), I could not help but appreciate the irony of being unconsciously treated like some kind of Protestant Divine here in remote Africa.

So distorted is the average Kenyan's perception of the West that I was once told by a Canadian colleague who once worked at the National Museums of Kenya that one of the technicians, the men and women who take care of the stones and bones on a daily basis told her that in his opinion all Africans are direct descendants of australopithecines and all white people are direct descendants of Jesus Christ.

One day I had my first direct experience of rural Turkana life. An acquaintance, let us call him Lokori, had been successful in town and had become an influential community member. Last year he married a local girl in the traditional manner and she remains in the traditional Turkana homestead, the "awi," with his first daughter and their family herds. He really wanted to visit them so we went.

As we drove across the plains and dried out riverbeds, I saw herds of camels and cattle, the dense vegetation of the Turkwell river forest and beyond the garden plots of Turkana women. We drove through the towns of Turkwell and Lorogum always getting closer to the green Loima hills, that became more and more distinct as we went west, darker and deeper green, a series of hills and low mountains that seemed to rise out of the ground from nowhere, as if they had once erupted from underground against all regional planning and had remained there ever since.

We drove out of town past a large "suburb" of Turkana traditional houses woven out of doum palm, interspersed here and there with cement sided houses with corrugated aluminum roofs which I was told was called "Nairobi." This is where those literate and educated Turkana who had landed jobs with various development organizations in the region were building their homes. We continued driving over the plains and dried out riverbeds. The grass was thick and green and stretched as far into the distance. Boran cows with their distinctive hump of fat rising up from the back of their necks and their curved horns (partly curved by their owners) grazed peacefully near contented herds of sheep and goats. The rains during the last few weeks had been unusual generous, people were happy, the animals were fat and no one was close to deciding to move their herds up into the Loima hills where they usually do their dry season grazing.

After passing through a number of trading posts and mission hospitals with their freckle faced Nordic looking volunteers, speaking in lilting Irish accents, we finally found the road to Lokori's home.

We talked of many things on the way. I compared the situation here with that of Marsabit district where I had spent two years and believe that the Turkana are very lucky. There is always dry season grazing in the Turkana highlands, wet season grazing in the plains and the women's agricultural plots of sorghum along the edge of the rivers such as the Turkwell, where they collect wild food to get them through difficult periods. The pastoral way of life is their whole way of life and even those educated in town and who had been to study in Norway thought in their own terms. For example an educated Turkana who had seen many cowboy films once asked me, "Are cowboys a tribe or an age set of warriors?" I very laboriously had to explain the concept of the cow-herding frontier of 19th century America and its social history in a manner accessible and acceptable to my host – I am not sure if I was entirely successful.

When we arrived at the house it was a few hundred yards from the road. We were ushered into a bower made of twigs and leaves and sat down on scraped cow hides, Lokori's mother, an ancient lady with many holes in her ears where earrings had once been, looked me over with confident curiosity and a sense of grandmotherly approach, joked with me that I had not brought her any chewing tobacco. His wife, carrying their small daughter, of one and a half years was smiling and was emotionally refreshing in her manner. His older sister had taken off all of her neck beads and ornaments because her husband had died recently and she was in a state of mourning until the ceremony when she would be allowed to wear them again.

An older man from a nearby house came by with a radio and was listening to the insipid broadcasts in Swahili that were wasting people's afternoons down country. He told me that during WWII he had fought in China. One day I thought it would be interesting to interview him and see just what it was that caught his attention in the far east, half a century ago.

Lokori and I took a walk down to the *lagga* (Swahili for dried out riverbed) to see his goats and there we met some herdsmen. The *lagga* was forested on either side and there was a small vestigial stream of water still flowing in the middle. We crossed over watching the clouds and the colours of the vegetation change, and strolled through ankle high grass. Lokori told me that if one follows the goat paths there is little likelihood of running into snakes since the goats frighten them off. Still, I felt a lot safer on ground that I could see despite the delight of the grass, the swooshing sound it made as we walked through it, and the almost tangible smell of the dead wood and the bush that was all around us. There was a veritable conversation of birds coming and in and out of our hearing range as we walked.

I realized that I could spend days wandering up and down these narrow but continuous oasis-like river beds and riverine forests just a few hundred yards from the pebbly plain where searing rocks grow so hot that one can see the heat waves rising and hear the rocks cracking

in the heat. I was told that many years ago Lokori's brother had gone on a successful cattle raid against the Samburu near Mount Kulal, southeast of the Lake. In those days the Turkana carried leather shields and were accompanied by a diviner or *emuron* who helped them avoid the pursuing authorities.

Beyond the southern tip of Lake Turkana in the Death Valley like heat of the Suguta Valley they remember that their sandals literally burnt up in the heat. They had to cut up their leather shields to replace their sandals and they noted that the water near the southern end of the lake was scalding hot. I concluded that when God had created the land around the lake he set aside Turkana district as a merciless land for merciless people.

But within the Turkana domestic homestead all is tenderness and warmth. There are always small infants crawling about and when they cry some woman holds them by the waist, looks gently into their eyes and croons while bouncing them on their thighs. No child was neglected and every burst of crying was greeted with physical affection as the infants were passed from hand to hand. Such is the case recorded in Thomson's 19th century journals during his travels among the Maasai, who at the time practiced a predatory and unforgiving attitude to outsiders – kill or be killed.

It is the goal of the Kenyan government and the missions to change all this and turn these proud people into law abiding and conventional Kenyans. Only one quarter of the Turkana have converted to Christianity or Islam. Men still wear wrist knives used to cut up meat and, any opponent who should dare to pick a fight. Their spears and war clubs are in good repair and no doubt they continue to find uses for them.

The border is relatively quiet but there have been cross border fights with tribes in Uganda and Ethiopia, complex affairs of traditional raiders, complicated by the breakaway groups in the Southern Sudan, Northern Uganda and Ethiopia. In one recent battle, around the disputed area of Kibish, Kenya soldiers sustained seventeen casualties and the Sudanese (if that is who they are) lost fifty. All sorts of big shots from down country came up in military helicopters to write reports and recommend policy.

Exactly what is going on is anyone's bet, but from my perspective, the border raids of the pastoralists, which have been going on for centuries, are now being mixed up with the disputes between nation states and are entangled in the carelessness of the frontier where warriors not only carry spears and clubs but rifles, which allow them to kill anyone in their way while rustling the herds of their victims. I have made it a policy not to do research in these areas. I only record this for the sake of my own memoirs and find the whole issue to be a

major headache. As I am here to train Kenyans in social science research, the last thing I need is that they get captured by cross border tribal raiders.

A few days later back in the district capital of Lodwar I was invited to Lokori's house in town where I discovered the *emuron* (diviner) sitting beside his house on a small hill. He was waiting for a dose of tetracycline for his hurt thigh, accompanied by one of his thirty wives. I was told that there are about 30 *emurons* spread across the Turkana district and all of them are related as family. Some are well known and have larger followings than others. A well respected *emuron* had died in recent fighting near Lokichoggio and Cassandra like, he had warned his people that a raid was about to take place. The men said that they could protect themselves if attacked. I heard that the *emuron* had been shot while his youngest wife wrapped her body around his in a pathetic attempt to save his life. Neither survived.

Well, this *emuron* and I started chatting. I dearly wanted to get a rough idea of the nature and practice of his divination. Instead he started by telling me that the *masungus* (the white man in Swahili) were superior to him in every way. He said that we had machines and were very strong. Also, that we were closer to God because we could get closer to the heavens in airplanes.

When I tried to steer the conversation towards predicting rain and complained that our people have to search for it in airplanes, he said that they predict it on radios too. Sometimes they are right. Sometimes they are wrong. He added that it was the same among the Turkana. I realized that he was not feeling all that well and that we should arrange to meet again in his home when he was feeling better, because in answer to an earlier question he told me that he had never met a *mazungu* who knew and understood the ways of the Turkana and he could clearly see that I had an interest in doing so.

He went to sleep soon after and Lokori and I sat on his balcony chatting about the Turkana calendar and his friends who found that Turkana culture was very similar to what he had read in the Old Testament. We compared the *emurons* to the Prophets of Israel and I pointed out that it was a bit abusive for my very religious Catholic doctor friend in Lodwar, Donald Gilchrist, to call *emurons* witch doctors despite my deep appreciation of his medical work and my enjoyment of his Scottish sense of humor. Witchcraft exists in Africa, but it is hardly the same as the divination carried out by the *emurons*.

We watch the lightning in the distance as he told me that some elders felt that a new sun rose every day. Others felt that it went into the ground and others did not just know. Likewise, he was puzzled why the Turkana have no names for the days of the week and the month and only

number the days from the full moon to the days of darkness on sticks. I thought to myself that the relation between Cushitic and Nilotic speaking peoples in this part of the world was still unclear and clouded by the ideology of independent Africa. Perhaps it is the Renville closeness to Ethiopia and Somalia that gives their calendar such exactness. I asked myself whether the Nilotes were less historical and lived within more limited parameters and if so, is there some social evolutionary significance of all of this? I do not know.

I drove back to my house and slowed down to see the Turkwell river bathed in moonlight as I crossed over the bridge, slowly thinking to myself what a privilege it was to try and understand the culture of a people like the Turkana, a culture, that like so many others would be steamrolled by missionaries and literacy within my own lifetime.

Oh yes, before he went to sleep the *emuron* told me a story about the pillars that can be found at the archaeological site called Namoratunga. Archeologists believe it to be a mini Stonehenge-like circle to calculate the calendar and no doubt the ritual cycles of the ancient pastoralists who inhabited this part of the world a couple of thousand years ago. According to the *emuron* a spirit once came from the river to dance one evening. His clothes made a funny noise and each time a spectator or participant laughed he or she was turned into a stone pillar.

I had always felt that God was too hard on Lot's wife, but the Turkana, as I have shown, live in a much harsher physical and social environment than did Lot and Abraham and perhaps this myth takes that into account.

Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large.

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