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The Barabaig
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Anthropologist George J. Kilma traveled to Tanzania in East Africa twice, once from 1955-1956 and again from 1958-1959. His objective was to understand and document the Barabaig tribes of Tanzania, a group numbering 20,000 members. During the years that Kilma studied the tribe, the Barabaig were undergoing a drastic, forced change. A change from that of an independent, pastoral people to that of a government regulated horticulture people. Kilma was able to document the last traditional characteristics of the tribe before they were diluted and lost to history. In addition to documenting not only the traditional Barabaig culture, Kilma also came across many environment, social, and cultural issues that faced the Barabaig in the 1950s.

Kilma's main focus in his anthropological visitation of the Barabaig people and the focus of his ethnography *The Barabaig* was cultural ecology. From the context of the ethnography, *cultural ecology* was how the environment and people interacted, and how the environment defined the culture of the people. The documented accounts of *The Barabaig* showed that Kilma was correct, the environment and ecology of the arid plains and pastoral livelihood defined the Barabaig's lives.

Mobility was essential for Kilma's documentation of the Barabaig tribe, for their territory was over a vast span of about one hundred square miles—necessary for the grazing of the numerous and life-giving herds of cattle. Kilma overcame the obstacle of movement with a pickup Land Rover that was his means to following the Barabaig on their seasonal grazing migrations and daily grazing travels. In order to hear personal accounts and genealogical data, Kilma harvested information from eight main informants and he also gathered information on traditions (past and present) from the elders of the tribes. And

finally, his most important method of gathering information was participation in daily goings-on and observations of their lives that come with inhabitation.

For the techniques used to document genealogies and tribal movements, Kilma used censuses and maps to record the dynamic social society. In addition, Kilma relied heavily on photography (motion-picture and still) to note rituals and understand their importance in Barabaig culture.

The essential element of the Barabaig tribe, according to Kilma, was their “cattle complex.” Kilma defined this as a, “configuration or organization of behavior patterns whose existence depends upon cattle as a cultural and existential focus” (Kilma 5). And this element truly defined the Barabaig—there was no piece of information in the ethnography that couldn’t be traced back to cattle. The cattle complex tied together with Kilma’s focus of cultural ecology really framed the structure of the Barabaig society. The simple fact was that the Barabaig herded the cattle and the cattle gave them the means to survive. These cattle defined the Barabaig’s food source, marriage possibilities, clothing, location of residence, size of family, and dynamics of neighborhoods. In essence, the cattle and the Barabaig were unified into one culture and society.

The Barabaig of Tanzania are members of a widely distributed ethnic group called the *Datog*. The Barabaig numbered at about 20,000 in the 1950s. They are of tall, thin stature and have a very dark complexion. As discussed in class, this height is expected of equatorial people for temperature regulation; the average male is six feet tall and the women are slightly shorter. In addition to their height, the Barabaig have other visually defining characteristics. These include body scarification and ear-lobe enlargement through the use of increasingly larger wooden pegs. Also the adolescent Barabaig at around the age

of ten undergo an operation to remove their two lower incisors, lest they should grow up with the "mouth of a donkey." Traditionally the men wore a red cloth called the *hangd* and the women a full, pleated skirt called the *hanangwend*. The Tanzanian government ruled both of these garments unacceptable and forced the men to wear cotton shorts and shirts. The similar ruling that women could no longer wear their *hanangwend* has been defied, for the skirts hold important fertility purposes for married women.

Cattle are a necessity for the Barabaig peoples, but in addition, goats, sheep, and donkeys can be found in some households. The cattle of the Barabaig must be brought to grazing areas daily, and these long walks, often three to ten miles in length, result in constant physical fatigue. This fatigue limits their amount of lactation; the average production of milk is four to six pints a day per cow that is lactating. There is the eternal problem for the Barabaig in reference to milk distribution during the dry season. The balance between using the milk to feed the Barabaig family and using the milk to feed the calves is dangerously met. The people must survive the drought, but without healthy calves, their herds will shrink.

The Barabaig people eventually use the entire cow in some way. The milk is used for sustenance in a variety of methods. The men drink it fresh while the women prefer it churned. Many prefer the milk mixed with the blood of the cow. Butter is essential for cooking meat and often used in rituals as well. The horns, the hide, and the dung are all used around the settlements as receptacles, garments and sacks, and building materials, respectively. The cattle are not killed for food, but once they die they are eaten.

Kilma wrote that, "Every Barabaig herd-owner seeks to acquire, maintain, and improve," the resources given to him—this is directly relating to the concept of a "herd"

(Kilma 17). The maintaining of a herd in Barabaig society is the single most important pastime of these pastoral people—a feat that is neither easy nor directly correlated to hard work. Often uncontrollable elements such as location, weather, and simple luck do more for or against a man and his herd than any controllable element. As a small seed grows into a large tree, so does a herd begin. The seed is most often donated cows from a family member to a young male. Through time, trading, and careful interactions, men develop and acquire herds ranging from ten to a few hundred. The possession of cattle is essential to a man's position in society. As the Yanomamö male hierarchy is determined by the war capabilities and Netsilik men are defined by their hunting, so are Barabaig men defined by the health and size of their herds. A man's herd gives him a voice and respect within his social setting and enables him to marry a good woman.

Three main issues that Kilma observed that the Barabaig face are the problem of water, the problem of grazing, and the problem of land. The problem of water is evident because most areas in the Barabaig's semiarid territory receive about twenty inches of water a year. They have a rainy season, in which water is plentiful, through the months of November to May. Then comes the dreaded dry season from May to October. The dry season takes a toll on the peoples and by August and September many people are using the few stagnant water resources—resulting in dehydration and disease. The second issue the Barabaig face deals with grazing. The Barabaig are forced to travel many miles with their herds to find grass; during the end of the dry season it is near impossible to locate substantial, healthy grazing materials. Some households are forced to split their herds in hopes of finding enough grass so that at least half of their cattle can survive. The final critical issue that the Barabaig are facing is the issue of land. Because of governmental

regulations and limitations of tribe lands the Barabaig continually have to compete with other tribes over the limited resource of land. In addition, because of integration through marriage of the Barabaig and Iraqw (a neighboring tribe), horticulture has drifted to the Barabaig tribe, much to the satisfaction of the Tanzanian government. Horticultural people are easier to regulate and control than nomadic, pastoral people. The horticulture of the Barabaig and other tribes has cut down on the available lands for grazing.

These settlement patterns of the Barabaig compare to the Yanomamö settlement patterns in many ways. Similarly to the Barabaig, the Yanomamö are limited by their resources and are forced to move when their lands are depleted from resources. In the Yanomamö, this is done when they make micromoves because their fertile gardens must be replanted nearby on new soil. In addition, the Yanomamö do not have seasonal moves, and generally, neither do the Barabaig. However, during a particularly arid dry season, the Barabaig might migrate specifically to certain areas to be closer to water to survive. This seasonal pattern parallels the Netsilik, who definitely possess seasonal migratory patterns as they travel from rivers (fish) to the ice (seals) to the tundra (caribou). Overall, the Barabaig move randomly like the Yanomamö, but can sometimes have a seasonal path like the Netsilik. Another way the Barabaig parallel the Yanomamö is their macromoves that split a village, called village fissioning, an example of a result of village fissioning is the village of Bisaasi-teri. Similarly, the Barabaig do not hesitate to move if a witch has cursed their herd, and this generally minimizes intra-village conflicts.

In accordance to their cattle complex, the Barabaig settlement patterns are defined by their cattle, just as the Netsilik's patterns are defined by their wild game. The Barabaig have no word for "village," because there is no settlement synonymous with a village;

instead the Barabaig settlements are neighborhoods that are named and located in reference to the center (a tree, reservoir, rock structure, etc.) and span out from that point. They occur in seven-mile radius, usually near some sort of water-source. The Barabaig homesteads, *gheid*, are a result of the cattle complexes as well, organized in a figure eight, with one portion for the family, *samod*, and one for the animals, *muhaled*. The homesteads are outlined by thick brush arranged as a fence, which runs about eight feet tall. Homesteads range in sizes, from those of monogamist families being rather small, to those of polygynist families being rather large. In addition, the larger the family than the larger the herd needed to sustain the family.

The *gheid* structures of the Barabaig families in which polygyny occurs are separated and discrete living areas for each wife and her children within the *samod*. There is hierarchy between the many wives, and harmony is a tricky beam to balance on. This is also seen with the Yanomamö; as an example: Kaobawä and his two wives. The older one, Bahimi, is his life companion while his younger one, Koamashima, is the one he visits more frequently because of her youth. Kaobawä must make sure not to make favoring one over the other too obvious in fear of causing fights. Necessities that contribute to the harmony of a large Barabaig household are that the wives live in separate living quarters and that the wives each make dinner for the husband. The husband is expected to eat the same amount from each wife's prepared meal. The Barabaig have patrilocal practices, which mean that for a period of time before the marriage ceremony a woman is expected to move into her father-in-law's house until her and her husband build a *gheid* of their own after their marriage. If she is not the first wife of her husband, than she moves into the *gheid* of her husband.

Upon birth, each Barabaig is a member of a family, which is a part of a larger social collection called a clan, or *dosht*. The *dosht* is a collection of men and women who all stem from a common ancestor who is the founder of the group. The clan is the Barabaig's descent group. Similarly with the tribes in Iraq, the Barabaig's clans, or *dosht*, serve as "multi-aid societies," which provide "social, economic, and political assistance to clansmen in trouble" (Kilma 39). The Barabaig's are patrilineal and trace their descent through male relatives.

Both male and female adolescents undergo an operation once they reach adulthood. For the females, it is a clitoridectomy and for the males, circumcision. These are rights-of-passage for the adolescents and must be finished before either is married. For the male children, this is a large ceremony involving honey beer, three days of celebration, and at the end, a month free of duties for the newly-circumcised members. For the females, the operation goes uncelebrated and unnoticed.

Females marry at around the age of 13 or 14, while men marry at about 24. This drastic age distinction is a universal norm, as discussed in class, and follows the cultural reason as well. This difference enables the women to be fertile and be married with their entire reproductive life ahead of them, and it enables the men to be mature and have large herds at the time of marriage to support the family. All Barabaig women must marry—no matter their physical or mental conditions. This is expected, and each post-pubescent woman was married in the Barabaig society that Kilma observed. In addition, men must marry outside of their clans; this is often difficult to do because the clan lineage goes back four generations. This practice follows the cultural universal of incest and most likely the ultimate cause is preventing infant depression. Infant depression occurs when close

relatives reproduce and produce offspring that is generally weak or handicapped. Though Kilma did not say this, I believe, as we learned in class, the cultural rule to prevent incest (found in the Barabaig society as the rule that "men must marry outside their clans") serves the biological necessity of variation in the gene pool. And finally, for a marriage to legitimately occur, a bride wealth transfer of cattle from the family of the groom to the family of the bride must take place. This is a payment that the husband makes, buying the right to his wife's children and her housework. On the declared day before the three-day wedding festivities occur, another cattle exchange occurs. This is the marriage cattle, and the afternoon is comprised of the determination of her marriage dowry. Her parents, uncles, and brothers contribute to her dowry of the marriage cattle. In the Yanomamö culture, the husband must provide "bride service," which is when the bridegroom provides game to the bride's family. These two practices are very different in action, but similar in symbolism, for in both the male is making a sort of payment for the bride.

A Barabaig generally goes from one ailment to another, and does not experience good health once in his or her entire lifetime. With living adjacent to livestock and having poor water sources, children are born into an infested environment and therefore all stages of life are plagued with death. Only the elders receive burials, while the rest are disposed of in the brush and left to the hyenas. The Barabaig fear not the elephants, the lions, or snakes—but they grow up fearing the hyenas because they are the sign of the end of a life. After a death of a family member, the family usually moves to a different location, for the Barabaig associate the illness with witchcraft and must move to free themselves of the sorcery that did them harm.

Barabaig work carefully alongside their cattle to create a hospitable living situation in the sometimes-inhospitable environment. Through their cattle complex, the Barabaig peoples are like a wheel barrel that use the cattle as the wheels, to help them move forward in their lives. I have a deep appreciation for these people of the African plains, and though they are continually dealing with the issues of water, grazing, other tribe encroachment, and government control, I hope that these peoples will eventually find a way to continue their traditions of the past that defined their society.

For the majority of *The Barabaig*, I was impressed with the view that Kilma gave the reader—an all-encompassing recording of the daily lives and importance of the cattle of the Barabaig of Tanzania. However, unlike the personal accounts of Napoleon Chagnon in his book on the Yanomamö, Kilma's ethnography was only factual, offering no personal anecdotes. In addition, Kilma was general with describing practices, and he never cited examples from the neighborhood he was occupying—an element that would have connected me more to the Barabaig. Also, I missed the female focus of Chiñas ethnography *The Isthmus Zapotec*. Kilma rarely focused on the women, whereas in Chiñas book I was able to connect with the Zapotec because I could place myself in their society. The Barabaig is a male dominated society and in addition *The Barabaig* was a male dominated text, so it was hard to have a personal attachment. However, I have always had a fascination with cattle herders of East Africa after visiting the Maasai with my family in 1998, and I found that same admiration surface upon reading about the Barabaig as well.

This ethnography has opened my eyes to the dynamic tendencies of our world—how the government is influencing the once-seemingly consistent lives of these pastoral people by regulating their dress and their grazing lands. I also have thought about how

global warming has contributed to the environmental issues of lack of water and lack of grazing lands of the Barabaig. Things that we read about in our country are a reality for others, and this made me aware of my actions. Reading of the Barabaig tribe helped me see the fascinating value that each society has to contribute to our global culture. I hope that now, fifty years after Kilma visited the Barabaig people, that they still have their traditional ceremonies, their *hanangwend* skirts, and their cattle.

Works Cited

Kilma, George J. The Barabaig: East African Cattle Herders. Long Grove, IL: Waveland

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