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Author(s): John Lamphear

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THE PEOPLE OF THE GREY BULL: THE ORIGIN AND EXPANSION OF THE TURKANA

BY JOHN LAMPHEAR

OVER the past decade, archaeology and linguistics have provided the bases for some impressive reconstructions of the early history of those parts of eastern Africa dominated by pastoral societies.¹ In some instances, fascinating correlations between the archaeological record and linguistic reconstructions have been attempted. Simultaneously, the use of oral traditions in such reconstructions has tended to fade into the background. Recently, however, some important challenges have been raised. It has been argued, for instance, that supposedly ancient 'proto-languages' of linguistic reconstructions may often represent a much more recent phase. Likewise, seemingly detailed pictures of cultural and economic developments in a given area derived from linguistic sources have sometimes been starkly contradicted by archaeological data. A number of suggested equivalences between archaeological cultures and specific language groups have also been rejected, and even the wisdom of trying to establish such archaeological-linguistic correlations at all has been questioned.² Suddenly our image of the early history of these regions appears disappointingly less vivid than it was a short time ago. In light of this, it might be worth while to give oral traditions a closer look. Admittedly these lack the chronological depth of archaeological and linguistic sources, and often present difficult problems of interpretation. Nevertheless they can make a more valuable contribution to reconstructions of the African past than often seems to be realized. In this paper I wish to demonstrate that Turkana traditions of origin and expansion represent not only a surprisingly sophisticated rendering of an extremely complex process, but also clearly point to certain factors in the development of East African pastoralism which archaeological and linguistic methodologies have only recently begun to identify.

In response to an outsider's general inquiry about their 'origins', most Turkana will respond by relating the widely known tale of Nayece and the lost bull. The story tells of eight young men who travel eastwards from the country of the Jie in Karamoja District of north-eastern Uganda tracking a lost bull of a specific shade of grey, *engi*ro. Descending the escarpment which now serves as the border between Uganda and Kenya, the young men arrive at the headwaters of the Tarash River. There, at a hill called Moru Anayece ('Nayece's Mountain'), they find the bull living with Nayece, an old woman, who had also come from Karamoja to gather wild fruits. She welcomes the young men by kindling a fire for them and shows them around the area, which

¹ See for example, Christopher Ehret and Merrick Posnansky (eds), *The Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction of African History* (Berkeley, 1982).

² Roland Oliver, 'Reflections on the British Institute's expeditions to the Southern Sudan' in John Mack and Peter Robertshaw (eds), *Culture History in the Southern Sudan* (Nairobi, 1982), 167; Nicholas David, 'The BIEA southern Sudan expedition of 1979', in Mack and Robertshaw, *op. cit.*, 53; Peter Robertshaw and David Collett, 'A new framework for the study of early pastoral communities in East Africa', in *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxiv (1983), 292-4.

they find to their liking. The young men return to the country of the Jie, collect additional young men and girls, and drive herds of livestock back to the Tarash, as though moving to dry-season cattle camps. They decide to remain permanently in the new area, and thus become the Turkana.³

Variants of this tale are popular and remarkably widespread throughout Africa. Some of its main elements appear in the traditions of people as far removed from the Turkana as the pastoral Fulbe of Liptako in West Africa, and, closer to home, a similar version exists among the Kaguru of Tanzania.⁴ Critical observers have warned that such traditions of 'origin' and early migration must be regarded essentially as political charters or cosmologies. If they have any historical content at all, they can be viewed as no more than 'a very disjointed fraction of the past'.⁵ Thus, in his analysis of the Kaguru version, Thomas Beidelman concludes that its fundamental message is social, rather than historical. The kindling of fire by the 'old woman' for the 'young men', for example, is seen by Beidelman as symbolic of a primal socialization process by which the foundation of an ordered society is conceived. In the same way, the Turkana version certainly provides them with a vivid idiom of corporate identity, and it also contains a rather subtle message regarding the importance of elders in counteracting dangerous fissiparous tendencies always present in the mobile, egalitarian pastoral societies of East Africa. But it also contains some valuable historical information.⁶ For example, 'Nayece' and the 'young men' can be seen as representing the two main subdivisions of the 'Ateker' branch of the eastern Nilotes to which the Turkana belong, a view supported by archaeological and ethnographic data. The tradition also can be regarded as a remarkably concise rendering of a complex process by which Ateker foraging expeditions and cattle camps gradually began to exploit the upper Tarash region from their bases in eastern Karamoja.⁷ In addition, there is most probably another element of historical interest in this tradition to which we shall turn shortly.

A number of other less 'formal' traditions concerning the early Turkana settlement at Moru Anayece also exist. While these lack the vivid drama of the 'Nayece/lost bull' saga, they do convey, in a prosaic, straightforward way, more information of historical significance. Thus, the developing community is said to have formed itself into two 'major parts', the Curo and the Monia, based on the two Ateker subdivisions. Women of each major part could be distinguished by their dress, and each group is said to have lived in its separate,

³ For the complete text of the tradition, see John Lamphear, *The Traditional History of the Jie of Uganda* (Oxford, 1976), 91.

⁴ Paul Irwin, *Liptako Speaks* (Princeton, 1981), 49 and 99; Thomas O. Beidelman, 'Myth, legend and oral history: A Kaguru traditional text', *Anthropos*, LXV (1970).

⁵ Jan Vansina, 'Comment: traditions of genesis', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xv, ii (1974), 322; also his *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985), 136 ff.; J. S. Boston, 'The hunter in Igala legends of origin', *Africa*, xxxiv, ii (1964), 125.

⁶ Beidelman, 'Myth', 80 ff. and especially 92-4; John Lamphear, 'Some thoughts on the interpretation of oral traditions among the central Paraniotes', in Rainer Vossen and Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst (eds), *Nilotic Studies* (Berlin, 1983), 112-18.

⁷ See Lamphear, *History of the Jie*, especially chs. III and IV. The term 'Ateker' replaces 'Central Paraniotes' used in this and other earlier writings. It should be noted that all Ateker group names properly should include the prefix 'Ngi-', meaning 'The people of' or 'Those of'. For convenience I have not used the 'Ngi-', form in this article. The letter 'c' in Ateker words represents the sound 'ch'.

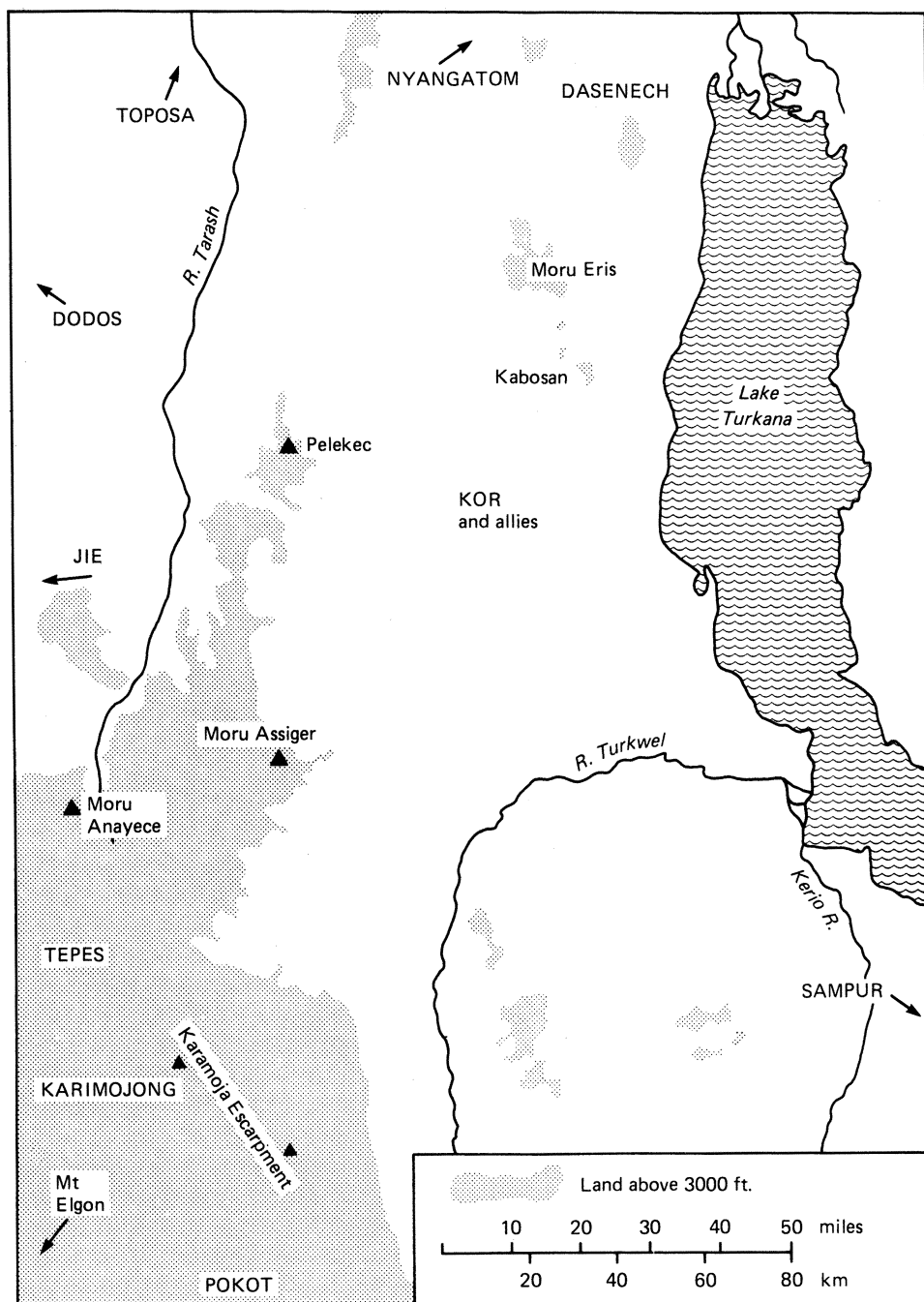


Fig. 1. Origin and expansion of the Turkana.

but adjacent, territory and shared the water of a common well. At the same time, family traditions present a picture of close association growing up between certain clans, often derived from frequent intermarriage, which sometimes transcended the distinctions between major parts. A further dilution took place as both groups began to identify themselves to others by the common name Turkana, 'Those of the Caves', reputedly because some people at Moru Anayece lived in caves when they first settled there.

Some traditions also tell of demographic fluctuations, recalling how some of the settlers abandoned the Tarash to move south to the area beyond Mt Elgon where they contributed a significant element to the developing Kenya Iteso community, while at about the same time far-ranging contingents of Bantu-speaking 'Meru' (whom one suspects may have been Kamba traders) were absorbed by several Turkana clans.⁸ Still other traditions describe important commercial relations that developed with the 'parent' Jie community. While the embryonic Turkana community grew some sorghum, it was clearly insufficient for its needs, and a considerable amount of grain began to be imported from the Jie. An equally important commodity was ironware, manufactured by Luo-speaking Labwor blacksmiths of western Karamoja, and supplied to the Turkana by Jie friends and kinsmen, some of whom began to assume the role of enterprising middlemen.⁹ Those Turkana informants who assign a time period to the settlement on the Tarash almost always claim it took place during the time of the Palajam generation-set, which, with well-taken caveats regarding the difficulty of chronological reconstructions based on oral materials firmly in mind, does certainly appear to correspond with the earlier eighteenth century.¹⁰

By the end of the Palajam initiations, the developing Turkana community was experiencing strong ecological pressures. Behind them, up the escarpment in Karamoja, other evolving Ateker societies such as the Karimojong and Dodos were occupying all available grazing lands. Therefore, Turkana cattle camps began to push further down the Tarash, which ran northwards below the foothills of the Moru Assiger massif on their right and the escarpment on the left. As they advanced, the Turkana came to realize that they were not alone in this new land. At night fires could be seen flickering on the slopes of nearby mountains, including Mt Pelekec which loomed up in the distance directly before them. A dreamer saw strange animals living there:

He told the people: 'On the mountains where we always see fires burning there seem to be animals like giraffes, but with humps on their backs. I would like some of you to go there and bring one of the young ones back here... When you reach Lotiyam mountain, kill a goat and eat it. Wait for the mothers of those animals to be driven to the east to graze and then capture one of the young ones'. So 27 young men went and captured a young one... they slaughtered it and smeared themselves with the chyme from its stomach as the dreamer had instructed them. They ate the meat and found it good, saying: 'This meat is like beef!'¹¹

⁸ Oral interviews with Turkana informants conducted in 1969-71 and in 1976 are abbreviated 'T', followed by the chronological number of the interview.

The foregoing information was derived from interviews including T-2, T-4, T-6, T-7, T-9, T-12, T-14, T-15, T-16, T-17, T-18, T-40, T-47 and T-58.

⁹ Lamphear, *History of the Jie*, 129, 193-4, 196 and 226.

¹⁰ Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 173 ff.; Lamphear, *History of the Jie*, 32-52; also Lamphear, 'Interpretation of oral traditions', 117.

¹¹ Lokimark, T-14.

The owners of those strange creatures – which were the first camels the Turkana had seen – seemed as alien to the Turkana as the animals they herded. The Turkana saw them as ‘red’ people, partly because of their lighter coloured skins, and partly because they daubed their hair and bodies with reddish clay. They gave them the name ‘Kor’, the same term still applied to the Maa-speaking Sampur (‘Samburu’). Traditions agree they were very numerous and lived in close pastoral association with the ‘Rantalle’ and ‘Poran’, the names used for the Cushitic-speaking Rendille and Boran. All three groups herded a variety of livestock, but the Cushites specialized in camels and the Kor in cattle. Together they controlled most of the country stretching out before the Turkana to the east.

On Moru Assiger, even closer to the middle Tarash, was another community of ‘red people’, the Siger, after whom the highlands were named. They too are pictured as a heterogeneous, multi-lingual confederation, including Southern and Eastern Nilotic-speakers, and those who spoke Cushitic dialects. They herded a distinctive type of long-horned black cattle and it was said they once held most of the surrounding country until the Kor and their allies came up from the south and took it from them. In the process, the Kor and Siger had blended to some extent. Many Siger had been absorbed by the Kor, ultimately to become part of the ritually-important Masula section of the Sampur, and there were Kor clans settled with the remnant Siger who held out on Moru Assiger.¹²

In all likelihood, the Siger represented a surviving pocket of what I have termed ‘old style’ pastoral communities which once had been common in East Africa. From the archaeological record, a pattern of complex socio-economic interaction between a wide variety of earlier East African societies, in which multi-lingualism in various Cushitic and Nilotic dialects was probably the order of the day, can be deduced. While ideologically committed to pastoralism, these societies often had to combine stock rearing with hunting and farming to survive. In my view, these early pastoralists can be associated with the legendary ‘Sirikwa’ recalled in the traditions of many present-day communities of East Africa.¹³

The same long-horned black cattle of the Siger feature in traditions concerning other communities with a Sirikwa association, including another multi-lingual group called the ‘Oropom’ in southern Karamoja. While the cattle may thus represent a kind of ‘oral shorthand’ to identify these ‘old style’ pastoralists, they may well be of actual historical significance too. Nicholas David has suggested that the dramatic expansions of eastern Nilotic populations in the second half of this millennium was stimulated by their acquisition of thoracic-humped Zebu cattle. In comparison to humpless breeds which earlier pastoralists had herded, the Zebu is a much harder animal, more resistant to diseases and heat-stress, and with significantly lower grazing and water requirements. This, David argues, permitted the Nilotes to develop new

¹² Interviews including T-10, T-11, T-18 and T-19; also see Neal Sobania, ‘The historical tradition of the peoples of the eastern Lake Turkana basin’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1980), 83–90.

¹³ Nicholas David, ‘The archaeological context of Nilotic expansion’, in Vossen and Bechhaus-Gerst, *Nilotic Studies*, 72–94; Robertshaw and Collett, ‘New framework’, 296; John Lamphear, ‘The persistence of hunting and gathering in a “pastoral” world’, *SUGIA*, vii, ii (1986), 248–53.

patterns of longer-distance transhumance (typical, it may be argued, of 'new style' pastoral communities), and thus to exploit more effectively the drier environments of East Africa.¹⁴

It is possible that the 'Nayece/lost bull' story may reflect the acquisition of the Zebu by the Ateker. The light grey bull, *engiro*, of the Turkana tradition 'refers back', via a Jie origin tradition which also features the capture of *engiro*, to *Longiro*, 'the place of engiro', which was the ancestral 'cradleland' of the entire Ateker community in the Sudan. In other words, the tradition contains a clear message that the very 'birth' of the Ateker was intimately bound up with the 'finding' or 'capture' of this particular bull. It is probably of some significance, then (and especially given the scores of designations for cattle colours in Ateker vocabularies), that this particular light grey shade is associated with the most distinctive variety of Zebu cattle in East Africa, the Boran type. The Boran, which the Ateker cattle of north-eastern Uganda and northwestern Kenya closely resemble, is particularly well adapted to hotter and drier areas.¹⁵

In marked contrast, the long-horned black cattle of the Siger probably should be regarded, not as humpless cattle, but as cervico-thoracic humped Sanga crossbreeds, which were distinguished by exceptionally long horns. Epstein believes that these animals were 'ubiquitous' in East Africa before the arrival of Zebu, which may not have happened until as late as the second half of this millennium. While somewhat hardier than earlier humpless breeds, the Sanga could not match the Zebu in its ability to survive under adverse conditions. This was especially true of Sanga varieties found in highland environments. Interestingly, in parts of south-central Ethiopia and in the Lake Turkana basin, these mixed-breed highland cattle tended to be of a distinctive black colour.¹⁶

In any event, even as Turkana cattle-camps began making contacts with these alien populations and their strange livestock, the area was beset by a terrible drought, the *Aoyate*, 'the long dry time'. Chronological reckonings based on the generation-set system suggest a date in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, a period in which chronological reconstructions among nearby peoples also suggest there was a massive drought which afflicted much of the Rift Valley region.¹⁷ The Siger community was decimated and began to collapse. Some abandoned their mountain and fled eastwards, but ran into even drier conditions: '[It] became dry and there was great hunger. The Siger went away to the east to Moru Eris, where most of them died of heat and starvation. So many died that there is still a place there called *Kabosan* ["the rotten place"]'.¹⁸ Bands of Turkana fighting men forced other Siger northwards

¹⁴ Nicholas David, 'Prehistory and historical linguistics in Central Africa', in Ehret and Posnansky, *Reconstruction of African History*; Lamphear, 'Persistence of hunting and gathering', 244-5.

¹⁵ Lamphear, 'Interpretation of oral traditions', 116; H. Epstein, *The Origin of the Domestic Animals of Africa*, 1 (New York, 1971), 372-7. There may also be veiled reference to their first acquisition of thoracic-humped cattle in Jie tradition recorded in Lamphear, *History of the Jie*, 152.

¹⁶ Epstein, *Domestic Animals*, 409 and 541-3; Sobania, 'Historical Tradition', 87.

¹⁷ See Alan Jacobs, 'Maasai inter-tribal relations', in Katsuyoshi Fukui and David Turton (eds), *Warfare among East African Herders* (Osaka, 1979), 12.

¹⁸ Ekuton and Lemkol, T-15.

to the head of Lake Turkana where they formed the Inkabelo section of the developing Dasenech community. Still others were pushed back onto the Suk Hills to the south to be incorporated by the Southern Nilotic-speaking Pokot as the ritually-important Kacepkai clan. Many were assimilated by the Turkana where some became a new clan known simply as 'Siger', and the victors took possession of the grazing and water resources of Moru Assiger.¹⁹

Traditions indicate that the collapse of the Siger was rapid and complete, and one is led to conclude that their attachment to the long-horned Sangas of the 'old style' pastoral era contributed to their downfall. Epstein has emphasized that such an attachment was 'social and ritual rather than economic', and that societies herding the long-horns would stubbornly resist switching over to hardier and more efficient, but aesthetically less satisfying, Zebu short-horns. We can deduce that the Siger already had been mauled by the Kor, like the Turkana another 'new style' pastoral community whose advance was fueled, in David's words, 'by Zebu cow power'. The *Aoyate* drought apparently decimated the long-horns salvaged by the remnant Siger on Moru Assiger, and now the Turkana, in their turn, rolled forward, again under 'Zebu cow power'.²⁰

But from their new footholds on the slopes of Moru Assiger, the Turkana, now incorporating considerable numbers of Siger, were confronted with a radically different environment sprawling out before them. To the east dry, rugged plains dropped steadily down towards the shores of Lake Turkana in the great trough of the Rift Valley. Other arid expanses presented themselves to the north and south, displaying much harsher ecological conditions than the people who had come down the escarpment from Karamoja had ever seen before. In fact, scant rainfall and searing heat made this region the driest in all of Kenya. Except for the brackish waters of the lake, permanent water (and even adequate dry-season grazing) could only be found along the foot of the escarpment and in scattered highland areas. Cultivation in this arid land was impossible, except along the banks of the larger river courses where subterranean water could be tapped.

Inhabiting this hard country, the Kor and their allies must have presented yet another daunting obstacle. These powerful people were hardly enfeebled Siger clinging stubbornly to ancient ways of 'old style' pastoralists. It is likely that their herds did contain numbers of Sanga cattle,²¹ but tough Boran Zebus predominated, and valuable pastoral diversity was provided by their herds of camels, so well suited to the desert-like conditions ahead. The Turkana thus found themselves poised on the threshold of a dramatic ecological and ethnic boundary. If they crossed it, they would have to become very different Turkana indeed.

At this point we encounter what we might term a 'second stage of Turkana origin'. A memorable tradition describes the extraordinary emergence of a leader called Apatepes: '[Originally] he lived with a pack of baboons. The

¹⁹ Interviews including T-3, T-4, T-5, T-8, T-11, T-12, T-15, T-17, T-18, T-19, T-20, T-54 and T-56; also see Sobania, 'Historical Tradition', 61 ff.; Juxon Barton, 'Notes on the Turkana tribe of British East Africa', *J. African Soc.*, xx, 70 (1920), 109.

²⁰ Epstein, *Domestic Animals*, 541-3; David, 'BIEA expedition', 55.

²¹ Epstein, *Domestic Animals*, 378. He also suggests that Maa-speakers continued to prefer Sanga cattle until the late nineteenth century, although the transition to Zebu began well before that.

Turkana caught him and brought him to Kakuma. That baboon could not speak, as he was only a baboon. But after he was captured by the Turkana, he turned into a man and a diviner [*emuron*].²² Apatepes is credited with miraculous supernatural powers, and he is closely associated with hunters. His name can be translated 'the father of the Tepes', the Tepes being a Kuliak-speaking group of hunter-gatherers who lived in the highlands just atop the Karamoja escarpment. His clan, Meturona, sometimes is referred to as *Kalokak*, 'the trapping people', by other Turkana. He is, then, a typical 'stranger/hunter' figure of the sort which features so importantly in the genesis traditions of various peoples throughout Africa. As Michael Kenny has noted of such a figure among Lake Nyanza societies, his 'bodily appearance expresses a marginal state', and he brings with him to the community which 'adopts' him a transcendence permitting them 'to become a people in relation to him, to his positional successors, and to his memory'.²³ Thus Apatepes is still revered by all Turkana as the founder of their Meturona line of diviners who held power until the late nineteenth century, and even the location of his grave at *Ekitoe ka Apatepes*, 'the tree of Apatepes' on the upper Tarash is known to people from every territorial section.²⁴

Among the Ateker, the Turkana are unique in according much importance to diviners (*ngimurok*). By far the most powerful were the 'Diviners of God' or 'Great Diviners', whose office was hereditary within a given clan, who were master of all the various mystical arts practised by a host of lesser diviners, and whose influence embraced the entire Turkana community. In these and other respects they bore a striking resemblance to prophet/diviners among other East African peoples, such as the Maasai and the Nandi, where they often represented 'emergent centralizing figures'.²⁵ It is clear, therefore, that the office of Great Diviner among the Turkana was inspired by some non-Ateker source. The Siger, who are widely credited with great mystical abilities, seem the strongest possibility. Their Kacepkai clan, displaced by the Turkana invasion of Moru Assiger, are said to have become the diviners of a number of different peoples in the Mt Elgon area, including, significantly, the Tepes.²⁶

In any case, the new corporate identity implied by the emergence of Apatepes is reinforced by a number of other, 'less formal', traditions stressing the concerted actions of a generation-set named Putiro, which almost certainly was initiated during the first half of the nineteenth century. Apparently little time elapsed after the acquisition of Moru Assiger before the Turkana again began to push across the ecological and ethnic frontier ahead of them. The young men of the Putiro drove the Kor and their allies eastwards to the shores of the lake, and then swung south, gaining control of the sprawling region between the Turkwel and Kerio valleys. Other Putiro raiding parties struck at communities of Ateker rivals, driving encroaching Karimojong and Dodos back up into Karamoja from escarpment areas in the west, and forcing the Toposa and Nyangatom back beyond the northern highlands into the southern Sudan. In the process, more strangers were assimilated. These people

²² Loseny, Lopus and Ebei, T-39.

²³ Michael G. Kenny, 'The stranger from the lake', *Azania*, XVII (1982), 22; also Boston, 'Igala legends', 125.

²⁴ Interviews including T-16, T-17 and T-52.

²⁵ J. Forbes Munro, *Colonial Rule and the Kamba* (Oxford, 1975), 29.

²⁶ Lamphear, 'Persistence of hunting and gathering', 246 and 249.

must have come to represent a considerable portion of the expanding Turkana; indeed, some territorial sections were mainly formed from them. Terse traditions describing this vast expansion imply it was carried out with minimal effort, and it does appear that the Turkana thus gained most of the territory (*Eturkan* – ‘Turkanaland’) they would ever control in a remarkably short span of time.²⁷

Some traditions also give the impression that the expansion was a military one: the Putiro emerge as heroic warriors who hammer one enemy people after another into submission. Despite such traditions, and the seemingly strong military preoccupation typical of East African pastoralists, it would be misleading to regard the expansion essentially in terms of military conquest. A closer investigation reveals that the Turkana military system was, at best, rudimentary at this time. Tactical organization, such as it was, emphasized small-scale raiding activity, and was marked by an almost chivalrous code of military etiquette. Strategy was ill-defined, and grand strategy virtually non-existent, with the elders using the generation-set system to control, rather than to mobilize, the aggressive tendencies of the younger fighting men. While some men responded to the economic incentive of military activity – the chance to build up a herd quickly – and others were attracted by the opportunity to acquire prestige, these were the motivations only of certain individuals, rather than anything approaching a collective motivation of Turkana society as a whole.²⁸

Perhaps a stronger dynamic in the expansion process lay in the very nature of a pastoral system such as that of the Turkana. With their characteristic mobility and fluid frontiers, constant inter-ethnic contacts and assimilations were ‘in-built’ into these systems, and, because of the extreme vulnerability of livestock to a host of catastrophes, they were ‘inherently unstable’. Great stress could be caused both when the herds became too large for available resources and when there were too few animals to support the human population. Sometimes an attempt to solve one of the problems quickly could lead to the other, creating a vicious circle. In the case of the Turkana, this process carried with it a growing momentum which put serious pressures on groups of strangers. Some of these people, seeing themselves incapable of surviving as an independent community, decided to ‘become Turkana’ *en masse*. Bearing in mind that culture, language and genealogical descent are independent variables in such a process, then the expansion of the Turkana in some areas probably involved the large-scale assimilation of rivals who ‘became Turkana’ in the face of escalating pressures rather more than any direct armed invasion of a given territory by the people for whom ‘Nayece’, a particular light grey bull, or ‘Apatepes’ held some significance.²⁹

²⁷ Interviews including T-2, T-3, T-5, T-6, T-8, T-13, T-14, T-15, T-19, T-35, T-40, T-53, T-54; also H. B. Kittermaster, ‘History of the Turkana’, Kenya National Archives, File number PRB/211 (abbreviated KNA-PRB/211), 1911, p. 50; J. R. Nimmo, ‘Handing over report, Lokitaung’, KNA-HOR/886, 1948, p. 2.

²⁸ For a thorough examination of the Turkana military system, see John Lamphear, *The Scattering Time: Turkana Resistance to the Imposition of Colonial Rule* (forthcoming), ch. 1; see also Fukui and Turton, *Warfare Among Herders*.

²⁹ Serge Tornay, ‘Generational age-systems and chronology’, an unpublished paper presented at the ‘Archaeology and ethno-history of the southern Sudan and adjacent areas seminar’, SOAS, London, 1980, 2–3; David, ‘Prehistory and historical linguistics’, 86; Robertshaw and Collett, ‘New framework’, 293.

Having been swallowed up by the Turkana advance, these rival communities faced something of a dilemma. On the one hand they would have wanted to retain a recollection of their separate identity; on the other they clearly were anxious to establish their credentials as *bona fide* Turkana. It is at this point, then, that we encounter a 'third stage' of Turkana origins. Certain informants, especially those belonging to clans or sections largely descended from assimilated peoples, will not tell the 'Nayece/lost bull' tradition when asked about the Turkana genesis. Instead they relate a story concerning the creation of Lake Turkana. At that time, the Turkana, Kor, Boran, Toposa, Dasenech, Pokot and other neighbouring peoples are pictured as 'one tribe' which had 'always' lived in northern or central Eturkan. One day a thoughtless child neglects to replace a stone which acts as a 'stopper' on a spring where the people get water, creating a terrible flood. A cataclysmic dispersal of all the various people results, and the 'Turkana' (who, after all, had 'always' included the Kor, Dasenech and the others) are left in possession of the land to the west of the newly-formed lake.³⁰

But why was it the Turkana who should have gained and held this momentum which permitted them to disperse and swallow up rivals, rather than the other way around? Differences between the pastoral system of the Turkana and those of some of their rivals (especially the camel pastoralists, who, like those societies who retained Sanga cattle, were less able to effect this sort of far-reaching expansion) may provide part of the explanation. The emergence of the Meturona diviners also may have been a contributing factor, although there is no indication that they played any practical role in facilitating this stage of the expansion. Clearly, there must have been other factors involved.³¹

Robertshaw and Collett have recently identified the importance of agricultural produce to the survival of pastoral societies. Indeed they have argued that specialized pastoral strategies are possible only where there is sufficient access to farming groups. In this regard, the Jie grain trade can be seen as critical, especially after the expanding Turkana crossed the ecological frontier beyond the middle Tarash. Similarly, Roland Oliver has stressed the importance of iron technology to the development and expansion of East African pastoralism, suggesting that it was even more important than the adoption of thoracic-humped cattle. Again, the steady flow of iron weapons from their Jie partners clearly was of prime importance; a Turkana informant explained: 'The Kor, Upe, Malire and Karimojong were all defeated and driven from this land by our ancestors. All those people were defeated with spears made by the Labwor and brought to us by our Jie friends'.³²

³⁰ Interviews including T-6, T-9, T-11, T-12, T-16 and T-19.

³¹ Sobania, 'Historical Tradition', 42-3 and 219. Traditions concerning Apatepes and the early Meturona diviners may well have been fostered in a later time after Turkana identity had begun to focus much more strongly on the diviners than in this early stage. For a full discussion of such a process, see John Lonsdale, 'When did the Gusii (or any other group) become a "Tribe"?', *Kenya Historical Review*, v (1977), 129-31.

³² Lokimak, T-14; Robertshaw and Collett, 'New framework', 296-97; Oliver, 'Reflections', 168-9. There may also have been important cosmological factors which underlay the expansion. See John Lamphear, 'Historical dimensions of dual organization', in Uri Almagor and David Maybury-Lewis (eds), *The Attraction of Opposites* (Ann Arbor, in press).

Thus, it was a combination of factors from which the complex formula of Turkana expansion was derived. By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the momentum which had so quickly allowed the occupation of most of Eturkan was abating. In some places, such as along the steep escarpment to the west, natural boundaries now marked the limits of Turkana control over grazing and water. Elsewhere, newly-evolving communities, such as the Cushitic-speaking Dasenech at the northern end of the lake and the Maa-speaking Sampur at the southern end, both composed in part from refugees displaced by the Turkana advance, were now offering a more determined resistance.

Simultaneously, it was becoming difficult to detect any firm basis for the continuation of Turkana corporate unity. By that time, the Turkana had built up a strong attachment to their local territorial sections, and differences in dialect, dress and other cultural features were becoming apparent between them. This was especially true for those sections which had incorporated large numbers of strangers. At least two such groups, the Kebootok cultivators who lived along the Turkwel and the Bocoros fishermen who inhabited the lake shores, had been only imperfectly absorbed and continued to live a quasi-independent existence.

A fundamental change had also taken place in the generation-set system. While the Putiro were still being initiated it had been possible to convene the congregation of senior elders at Chokichok in central Eturkan. As the advance pushed further and further afield, however, such concerted action became impossible and generation-set activity came to be focused on individual local areas. The system itself took on a new form, and even the basic principle that the initiations of alternate, 'father-son', generations were supposed to follow one upon another was disregarded, and they began to be held concurrently. This was probably less a 'deterioration' of the original model than a creative adaptation which allowed for the more efficient mobilization of young fighting men, probably inspired to some extent by the age-systems of Maa-speakers encountered during the expansion. Nonetheless, it did signal a marked decrease in the traditional authority of the senior elders who previously had provided such an important focus of Turkana group identity.³³

At this critical point, another dramatic Turkana genesis tradition, this one concerning Lokerio, a Meturona Great Diviner descended from Apatepes, reveals one last 'stage of origin'. In some versions, paralleling the 'child and the spring' tradition, Lokerio 'creates' Lake Turkana by beating on rocks with his sacred stick so that water floods out. He is then depicted as leading a large Turkana army across the lake to raid the Sampur and their Cushitic allies, and returning with large numbers of camels which provide the basis for the present Turkana herds. This was accomplished by Lokerio 'parting the waters' with his stick so that his men crossed over safely, and then closing them to deny his enemies pursuit. And so once again we find a popular motif, widespread throughout Africa, which conveys, via the magical crossing of waters, the idiom of a society's transcendence, in this instance a kind of 'rite de passage', by which the Turkana assumed a new collective identity focused on the figure of Lokerio the diviner.³⁴

³³ Lamphear, 'Historical dimensions'.

³⁴ Interviews including T-17, T-39, T-52 and T-55; Wyatt MacGaffey, 'Oral tradition in Central Africa', *Int. J. Afr. Hist. Studies*, VII, iii (1975), 420.

It is clear that by this time the Meturona diviners had replaced the elders as directors of the Turkana military system. In the process they gave the Turkana a degree of military centralization they had never known. Much larger and better co-ordinated armies now attacked the Sampur and other enemies, most of them weakened by a series of cattle epizootics beginning in the late nineteenth century, and the Turkana expansion rolled forward once again into areas at the extreme northern and southern ends of Eturkan.

The new sense of unity derived from Lokerio proved transitory, however. After his death in the 1880s other aspiring prophet-diviners began to covet the influence and power that was now accorded the Meturona Great Diviners. By the final decade of the century, Turkana corporate identity began to diminish as various sections aligned themselves with one or another of the contenders. Expansion again came to a halt as most frontier areas became stabilized. In some places 'reciprocal raiding' marked the achievement of a military balance. In others, close economic and social interactions with neighbouring peoples led to a blurring of ethnic identity. Intermarriage and multi-lingualism became common.³⁵

Whether Turkana corporate identity would have survived much beyond the early years of the twentieth century is a moot point. The arrival of the colonial administration ensured that that identity would persist, although under radically different circumstances. Following a period of determined resistance, one's 'Turkana-ness' came to be defined, at least officially, by rigid administrative boundaries, a 'closed district' status, and a hierarchy of government headmen and chiefs. Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the definition derived from insightful historical traditions of a special light grey bull and the magic of diviners has continued to provide a deep and abiding satisfaction.³⁶

SUMMARY

While archaeology and linguistics provide an important basis for the reconstruction of the early history of those parts of eastern Africa inhabited by pastoral societies, oral traditions also can make a valuable contribution. In this paper an examination of the traditions of the Turkana of north-western Kenya reveals an often remarkably sophisticated rendering of complex processes of origin and migration. Moreover, those traditions also embody insights into basic factors concerning the development and spread of pastoralism in East Africa that the methodologies of other disciplines have only recently begun to identify.

Turkana traditions suggest that their society had not just one, monolithic 'origin', but rather what might be seen as a whole series of them. Highly dramatic and memorable tales of genesis provide vivid idioms of socio-political identity and also contain fundamental cosmological messages. But they also correspond to important stages of change in the development of the Turkana community, and, as such, they (together with less 'formal' traditions associated with them) provide vital historical information.

The factors which combined to enable the Turkana to carry out their vast and rapid territorial expansion are identified. For instance, one early tradition suggests a fundamental change in their pastoral system – the acquisition of Zebu cattle –

³⁵ Lamphear, *Scattering Time*, ch. 1.

³⁶ Lamphear, *Scattering Time*, ch. 1; also see Margaret Hay, 'Local trade and ethnicity in western Kenya', *Afr. Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 11, 1 (1975), 11.

while others emphasize important commercial contacts which provided a steady flow of iron-ware and grain. Still others trace the development of the office of Great Diviner, revealing how it became a primary focus of economic and cultural re-definition and corporate identity as alterations to the earlier generation-set system occurred. Another tradition provides a glimpse of Turkana expansion from the point of view of peoples absorbed by it.