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FISHERMEN HERDERS: SUBSISTENCE, SURVIVAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN NORTHERN KENYA[1]

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THE linkage in East African prehistory between fishing settlements and the advent of food production, both pastoralism and agriculture, is one of many topics in African history with which Roland Oliver has been associated. Through his commitment to the work of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, the research of John Sutton, David Phillipson, Peter Robertshaw and others has been encouraged, and their findings have added greatly to our understanding of these communities and the relationships between them.[2]

Today in East Africa there are still people whose subsistence pattern includes fishing and others who continue to practise pastoralism. In northern Kenya on Lake Turkana are two such communities who fish, the Elmolo and the Dies, and both have had close economic links to pastoralism. Each one's interaction with neighbouring pastoralists has, however, involved very different circumstances. The Elmolo, who today live in two villages at the south-eastern end of the lake, have in the past existed as a separate society in the midst of pastoralists. On the semi-arid plains adjacent to their island enclaves, the Elmolo have had particularly close contact with the cattle-herding Samburu and camel-herding Rendille. In contrast, the Dies exist as a group of fishermen within Dasenech society. As among the Samburu and Rendille, livestock transactions are central to Dasenech subsistence, their values and their social relationships, yet because of the range of resources they control in the unique ecological niche at the northern end of Lake Turkana, they also practise agriculture and fishing.

This paper focuses on the recent history of the Elmolo, and to a lesser extent that of the Dies, from the late nineteenth century to the present. By charting the various interactions which these fishermen have had with their pastoralist neighbours, the dynamic role of such communities as a component of the pastoralist system will be illustrated. Further, since much has been made in the past of the Elmolo being a 'dying tribe', this presents an opportunity to address

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[2] See, for example, J. E. G. Sutton, 'The aquatic civilization of Middle Africa', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XV (1974), 527–46; D. W. Phillipson, 'Lowesera', *Azania*, XII (1977), 1–32; *idem*, 'The origin of prehistoric farming in East Africa', in B. A. Ogot (ed.), *Ecology and History in East Africa* (Nairobi, 1979), 41–63; P. Robertshaw, 'Prehistory in the Upper Nile Basin', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XXVIII (1987), 177–89.

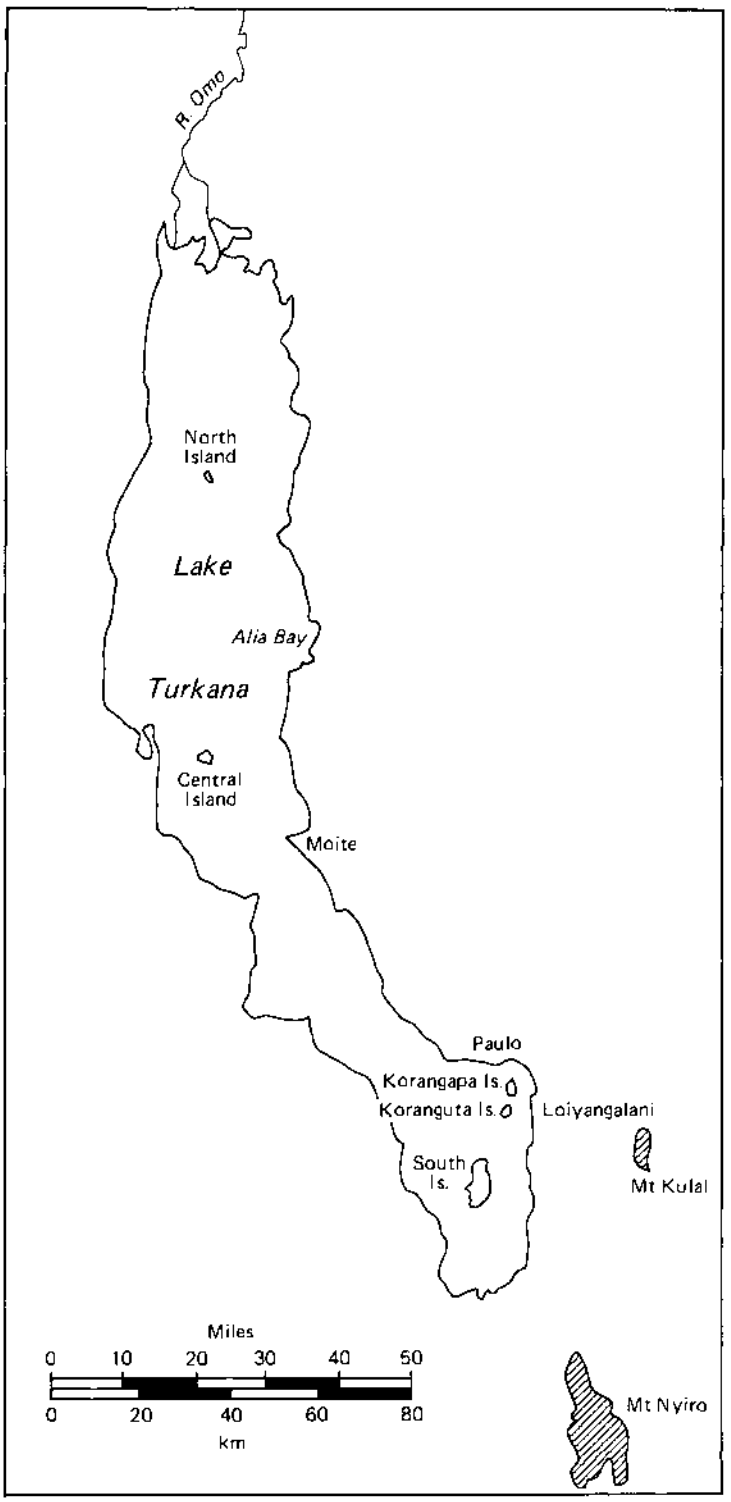

Fig. 1. Lake Turkana.

this issue.[3] If the Elmolo are indeed a 'dying tribe', in what context? and how does their passing relate to the pastoralist communities in whose midst they live?

I

In an appendix to his important study of the relationships between the cattle-herding Samburu and the camel-herding Rendille of northern Kenya, Paul Spencer looked at the links between these pastoralists and neighbouring hunter-gatherer ('Dorobo') groups.[4] This account rightly emphasised the role of the Elmolo as a particular type of hunting and gathering group. This context is important to an understanding of the dynamics that existed between the fishing communities, and indeed all the hunter–gatherer groups in East Africa, and their neighbours, whether they were herders or farmers.

In the nineteenth century and earlier, the small-scale societies that characterized East Africa were continuously reshaped as individuals and groups moved, according to their economic status at any given time, between the subsistence modes of pastoralism, agriculture, and hunting–gathering and fishing. Prior to the imposition of rigid 'ethnic identities' in the colonial period, these small-scale societies were mosaics of once separate groups and individuals that came together to exploit a particular ecological zone. And because many of these societies occupied regions in which low population-to-land ratios were the norm, their loose societal structures were an integral part of their adaptive strategy; they expanded and contracted in response to their changing conditions.[5]

In the Lake Turkana basin the majority of peoples had an economic and cultural commitment to herding. Cattle and camels especially were property which represented wealth, social status and, by extension, influence. Self-sufficiency based on livestock was the professed norm of these pastoralists, yet convenience and expediency dictated a wide range of deviation.[6] Notions of

[3] See, for example, W. S. Dyson and V. E. Fuchs, 'The Elmolo', *J. Royal Anthrop. Inst.*, LXVII (1937); Merrell Dalton, 'The Elmolo: a dying tribe on the shores of Lake Rudolf', *East African Annual*, (1951/52), 45–7; Kenntner Pfannkuch, 'El Molos-ein Volksstamm stirbt aus' ('El Molo-a race dies out'), *Bild der Wissenschaft*, XII (1976); Sarah Elderkin, 'Elmolo: the fisherman of Lake Turkana', *The Nairobi Times Magazine*, 27 Nov. 1977; Patrick Marnham, 'The smallest tribe', in his *Dispatches from Africa* (London, 1981).

[4] Paul Spencer, *Nomads in Alliance: Symbiosis and Growth Among the Rendille and Samburu of Kenya* (London, 1973), 199–219; this is based upon research done in 1958.

[5] N. W. Sobania, 'The historical tradition of the peoples of the eastern Lake Turkana Basin, *c.* 1840–1925', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of London, 1980), with further elaboration in *Man, Millet and Milk: Shifting Boundaries of Ethnicity in Pre-Colonial Kenya* (forthcoming). Cf. J. L. Berntsen, 'The Maasai and their neighbors: variables of interaction', *African Economic History*, II (1976), 1–11; R. Waller, 'Ecology, migration, and expansion in East Africa', *African Affairs*, LXXXIV (1985), 347–70; D. M. Anderson, 'Cultivating pastoralists: ecology and economy among the Il Chamus of Baringo, 1840–1980', in D. Johnson and D. M. Anderson (eds.), *The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies from Northeast African History* (Boulder, Col., and London, 1988).

[6] Despite earlier attempts to draw a distinction between 'pure pastoralists' and 'semi-pastoralists', pastoralism has never been a closed economic system. See, for example, A. H. Jacobs, 'African pastoralists: some general remarks', *Anthropological Quarterly*, XXXVIII (1965), 144–155, and J. L. Berntsen's reassessment in 'Economic variations among Maa-speaking peoples', in B. A. Ogot (ed.), *Ecology and History in East Africa* (Nairobi, 1979), 108–27.

equality and redistribution were countered by the reality of individual holdings, which varied from those with but a few head of cattle or camels, to those with hundreds of head. Survival as a pastoralist necessitated a strategy which provided the greatest possible access to stock in order to ensure the continued survival of the herdsman and his family within the pastoral economy. And despite the deprecatory attitude of pastoralists towards non-herding activities, the harshness of the environment in which they lived dictated that even the wealthiest among them traded for grain and engaged sporadically in hunting and gathering.

Gathering involved the collection of fruits and berries by children and young girls. More substantial foods such as roots were usually only collected when times were hard. Honey, which was eagerly sought, was nevertheless a virtual monopoly of hunter–gatherer groups and had to be obtained through trade. Little is known about the significance of hunting in the diet of pastoralists, but in many areas wild animals existed in large numbers and in the past were certainly more numerous than today. Animal products, from ostrich feathers to giraffe-hide water containers, served important functions throughout the region, as the animals from which these came were hunted in times of prosperity as well as times of economic crisis. And fish, despite its professed avoidance and associations with the poorest economic and social status, was also caught and eaten, although probably far less frequently by some people than by others.

The most significant dietary supplements for herdsmen and their families were agricultural products. While some societies lived in areas favourable to cultivation, as for example the Dasenech at the northern end of Lake Turkana, the usual source of such products was through trading stock and animal by-products. The trading links which pastoral communities maintained with their neighbours in order to secure access to these products are evidence of their significance.[7] True, the majority of people in the Lake Turkana basin engaged in these activities only as a supplement to herding. But in times of crisis, as occasioned by drought, disease or warfare, the presence of hunting–gathering and fishing communities became vital because of the economic alternative that they represented. In fact, it was the radically different economic practices of these groups that set them apart, allowed them to maintain their own identity, and prevented their coming into conflict with and being absorbed by the pastoral communities that surrounded them. Thus, 'to become Ndorobo' must be seen as an adaptive strategy: the adoption of a specialized mode of subsistence.[8]

In the past each hunter–gatherer and fishing group was linked to a particular pastoral society. For example, the Suiei, one of the few hunter–gatherer groups to have been looked at in detail, appear to have had such a link with the Laikipiak Maasai. When the Laikipiak suffered a series of defeats in the nineteenth century and were subsequently dispersed, the Suiei stayed where they were. In all probability their specialized hunting and gathering economy discouraged them from leaving an area with which they were thoroughly

[7] N. Sobania, 'Historical tradition', 105–21 and 'Feasts, famines and friends: exchange and ethnicity in the 19th century eastern Lake Turkana regional system', in P. Bonte and J. Galaty (eds.), *Herders, Warriors and Traders: The Political Economy of African Pastoralism* (forthcoming).

[8] Spencer, *Nomads*, 199–200.

familiar. Then, when the Samburu moved into the area and replaced the Laikipiak, the Suiei developed a similar alliance with them.[9] In addition, many of the defeated and impoverished Laikipiak took up residence among the Suiei and other neighbouring hunter–gatherer and fishing communities. For many Laikipiak the subsistence practices of these groups provided the only alternative available to them.

For all the pastoralists of the Lake Turkana basin, the hunting, gathering and fishing communities in their midst represented a possible refuge upon which the impoverished and destitute members of their societies could fall back. Viewed as a temporary expedient, these former herdsmen and their families adopted the economic mode of their hosts, but with the intention of returning to pastoralism once they had accumulated sufficient livestock. For many, however, this shift became permanent; for others a generation or more was needed to complete the transition back to pastoralism.

II

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, bovine pleuro-pneumonia, rinderpest and smallpox swept across East Africa. The peoples of the Lake Turkana basin did not escape these disasters, although the degrees of suffering felt by different societies and the individual households within each one were subject to a wide range of factors.[10] As described by a Samburu informant:

> most of the people died because of starvation...they didn't have food...so people went and hunted elephant and ate; ate rhinoceros...A few of them had small stock [sheep and goats] and lived again.... The time of starvation people scattered everywhere, is it not so? Some escaped to the Turkana, some went to the Boran, some went to the Dasenech and some went to the Elmolo and some were killed by the Rendille while stealing livestock. Some went to the Rendille and [others] became thieves who lived in the bush and stole camels. Some went to the Ndorobo and took roots from the ground.... Most people died of starvation. No matter which person it was, a warrior, a child, a woman...all died.[11]

The widespread famine that came in the wake of the disasters led to the massive dislocation of people: 'Everyone scattered and passed his own way because of starvation; they scattered and ate what they got'.[12]

In principle a herdsman had four options available to him. Few individuals and their families remained untouched by the devastation of the period, but the most fortunate continued as pastoralists within their own community. Others were compelled to seek refuge among neighbouring pastoralists; a move that held the potential for their being assimilated and taking on a new ethnic identity. The circumstances of this period led sundry other individuals and

[9] Spencer, *Nomads*, 282–6. Spencer argues that this pattern has encouraged a large degree of permanency among the Ndorobo.

[10] Sobania, 'Historical tradition', 132–71.

[11] Lenatitai Barantis (and others) at South Horr on 25 Sept. 1976, Samburu Historical Text (hereafter SHT) 37. Transcriptions of historical texts are cited as follows: the name of the informant(s), interview location, date, and interview number. Interviews with Rendille, Elmolo and Dasenech informants follow the same format, but with 'RHT' to indicate Rendille Historical Text, 'EHT' for Elmolo Historical Text, and 'DHT' for Dasenech Historical Text.

[12] Lesachari at Wamba on 20 Sept. 1976, SHT 32.

groups to seek an existence outside the pastoral sphere. Some herders managed this while maintaining their ethnicity, while others survived among communities which were neither economically nor ethnically related to their own. Because the first two circumstances are concerned with a continuation in pastoralism, they will not be developed further.[13] The latter two, however, relate directly to the role played by hunting, gathering and fishing communities and provide the context for examining the role played by one such community, the Elmolo, and the dynamics of their relationship with their pastoral neighbours, the Samburu and the Rendille.

This examination of the role played by the Elmolo is not meant to imply that they were somehow a more significant group than the hunter–gatherer communities in the mountain forests adjacent to the plains. Indeed, the Samburu readily acknowledge that many of their number went destitute and starving to the Ndorobo in the mountains:

> Some of them became Ndorobo and survived there; Ndorobo who were living in these mountains. A few of them, many of them, died because of famine...Ndorobo taught them. They told them, 'This thing is called like this'. Even honey; Ndorobo got the honey and gave it to the Samburu. They taught them, taught them, taught them. They speared a rhinoceros and ate it; speared an elephant and ate it. All the things which lived in the bush they ate. They ate that thing; they ate that thing; they speared it with a spear. People survived because they ate that food.[14]

Some no doubt went to a particular group with whom they had previously enjoyed a trading relationship for such things as honey, hunting arrows and wooden containers. Others went to wherever they found acceptance, and some attempted to survive by forming their own Ndorobo bands. The same pattern holds true for those who went to the Elmolo. An Elmolo informant in describing such herdsmen declared: 'their animals died and they were finished; after that they didn't have animals and they came this way as they had nothing to eat. That's why they became Ndorobo...They couldn't help themselves so they just came [here] and we lived together and shared what we had'.[15]

The reason for focusing on the Elmolo is a result of the accessibility of information about change in Elmolo society. Today the mountain communities which are still known by the name Ndorobo fully identify with the Samburu whom they emulate, and are extremely reluctant to admit to having ever embraced a hunter–gatherer existence. Their subsistence is almost exclusively pastoral, and hunting, which has been illegal for the greater part of this

[13] Sobania, 'Historical tradition', 173–4.

[14] Nanalepishu (and others) at Maralal on 19 March 1976, SHT 22, and interviews including SHT 28, 35, 36, 37; RHT 6; W. A. Chanler, 'East Africa – Mr Astor Chanler's Expedition – Lieut. von Höhnel', *Geog. J.*, II (1893), 535; C. H. Stigand, *To Abyssinia Through an Unknown Land* (London, 1910), 78.

[15] Lengkatuk (Ite) at Korangapa Island on 15 July 1976, EHT 6; also EHT 3, 13; SHT 36. Donaldson Smith, who observed these communities in 1895, concluded that 'Elmolo' was the name given to those people of Lake Turkana who lived by hunting and fishing, just as the Maasai applied 'Ndorobo' to the poor people in other parts of the country; see his *Through Unknown African Countries* (London, 1897), 327. The name 'Elmolo' is of unknown derivation. The Elmolo, whose own referent for themselves is *Gurapua*, are known to the Samburu as *Ildes*, to the Rendille as *Dehes*, to the Dasenech as *Hereny*, and to the Turkana as *Ngimoile*.

century, plays little or no part. Similarly, herdsmen whose families resorted to Ndorobo practices in periods of crisis are loath to acknowledge in any but the most general terms their own families' participation, and then only to concede it as having been, within the more general framework, unexceptional. Their reasons are associated with the standards of behavior which continue to be ascribed to the Ndorobo. In comparison, the Elmolo have not yet become so totally immersed in 'being' Samburu, although, as detailed below, that day may not be far off. Today the Elmolo remain involved in the fishing and, to an extent, the hunting (hippopotamus, crocodile, tortoise) aspects of their traditional economy. The elders of the community continue to be open about their former way of life, their past history, and the changes which they have witnessed or been told about. In addition, the Elmolo have continued to accept impoverished neighbours, although these have more typically been Turkana recruits during the twentieth century.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century the eastern shore of Lake Turkana was dotted with fishing settlements. Only those to the south of Alia Bay, however, belonged to the Elmolo. Those to the north of the bay were Dasenech, specifically that element of the Dasenech population, the 'Dies', who relied on fishing for their subsistence. The place of the Dies in Dasenech society was unique. On the one hand they were considered Dasenech, yet economically, and to some extent culturally, they were set apart, much as hunter–gatherers and fishermen were from the pastoralists of Samburu and Rendille.[16]

The same word used by the Dasenech for these fishermen, *dies*, also meant poor. The distinction made by the Samburu regarding the Elmolo fisherman as an 'Ndorobo' community, specifically without animals, was also made by the Dasenech:

Dies are Dasenech. Like those people we call Elmolo (*Hereny*), we call those who are Dasenech, Dies. [They are] people without animals...those Dasenech who don't have animals are Dies.... A person whose animals we can't see [does not have stock], next he goes to the lake shore. A person whose animals aren't many, he has his animals [is not a Dies].[17]

Many Dasenech also considered the Elmolo to be part of this community: 'Dasenech and Elmolo [*Hereny*] are one...Elmolo are Dies. They live by the lake and they are one with these Dies. We, who are Dasenech, have animals. They live by the lake...[and] eat fish'.[18] The trading relationship which the Elmolo and the Dasenech enjoyed, especially through the Dies, was reinforced and encouraged by this belief in their oneness:

The Dasenech didn't fight with us as we are brothers.... Long ago age-groups met with them, lived with them and just divided with them peacefully.... We exchanged and also used to share food, as the Dasenech used to come and eat our food, and we went to Dasenech and ate their food.[19]

[16] U. Almagor, *Pastoral Partners* (Manchester, 1978). 52; *idem*, 'Tribal sections, territory and myth: Dassanetch responses to variable ecological conditions', *Asian and African Studies*, VIII (1972), 185–206.

[17] Assura (Iorar) at Bubua on 13 Feb. 1976, DHT 18, and interviews including DHT 31, 33, 39, 50.

[18] Iesho (and others) at Ilkamerreh on 4 Sept. 1976, DHT 50; also DHT 22, 24.

[19] Lengero at Korangapa Island on 14 July 1976, EHT 3, and interviews including EHT 2, 12; DHT 38, 39.

The Elmolo and the Dies came into contact in the region from Alia Bay southwards, where the former lived. Travel by the Elmolo was limited in large measure by the rafts that they constructed from the trunks of doum palm trees. They seldom ventured very far on these rafts because with extensive use the logs absorbed water and became unseaworthy. Until the logs again dried out in the sun their users were stranded. The waters of Lake Turkana, subject to ever-changing winds and weather, could also create a very rough sea. The Dies, who made sturdy canoes from the hollowed out trunks of hard wood trees found along the Omo river, were less restricted and often poled their way along the entire eastern shoreline.[20]

On fishing and hunting expeditions, and in search of trading partners, the Dies often took up residence among the Elmolo.[21] From the Omo delta area where the Dies, like the cattle-owning Dasenech, harvested their crops of millet, they travelled south to trade grain, tobacco, spear points, gourds, beads and household utensils such as wooden porridge bowls and fat containers. These they traded to the Elmolo, Samburu and Rendille.

The Elmolo also traded with the Samburu and Rendille, but not in competition with their Dasenech visitors. In part this was due to their trading of different commodities. The articles fashioned and traded by the Elmolo included a variety of ropes, mats and baskets from palm leaves, pots from local clay and shoes from hippopotamus hide. Equally important, the interests of the Elmolo and Dies in terms of what they received in exchange for their trade articles were different. In particular, the sheep and goats offered in exchange by the Samburu and Rendille held a greater attraction for the Dies. It was small stock such as these, which they could later exchange for cattle among the other Dasenech and pastoralists along the Omo, that would eventually allow them to re-enter the cattle economy. In contrast, the Elmolo appear to have had few pastoral interests in the nineteenth and first years of the twentieth century, a position that must at least in part be attributed to their more powerful pastoralist neighbours with whom they would have had to compete for grazing. Instead, the Elmolo willingly traded for pastoral by-products such as hides and skins, and any small stock they received were ordinarily slaughtered and used only as a supplement to their diet of fish.[22]

Finally there appears to have been one other reason for the lack of competition between the Dasenech Dies and the Elmolo. Although items of exchange passed in all directions between the Elmolo, the Dies, the Samburu and the Rendille, the principal pairs of trading partners were the Dies–Samburu, and the Elmolo–Rendille. The Samburu rarely acknowledged the existence of trade with the Elmolo, and the latter record that they had few items valued by the Samburu other than the eagerly sought hide shoes which they exchanged for spears. Most other items the Samburu also crafted.[23] At the same time, however, the Rendille readily identified the Elmolo as superior craftsmen in the manufacture of the ropes, baskets, mats, clay pots and shoes that they required. When their herding brought the camels near the lake shore they would seek out the Elmolo to trade with them their animal skins and small

[20] In the accounts of early travellers these two fishing communities can often be distinguished by the transport they used on the lake.

[21] See, for example, EHT 1, 4, 6.

[22] Interviews including SHT 1, 6, 7, 11, 13; EHT 3, 4, 8; and DHT 18, 50.

[23] Lengkatuk, EHT 6.

stock as well as articles of ironware which they acquired from the Meru and Somali to the east.[24]

Exchanges between the Dies and the Elmolo were almost exclusively of a gift variety between friends [*yalou*: Elmolo; *bel*: Dasenech]:

> The ones who wanted to exchange things with them [the Dasenech] exchanged, and the ones who had their friends gave to them freely. They just went and told them, 'This is the gift we have brought you', and [then] went back.... Whoever wanted to have a friend would make one easily.[25]

Other trade relationships were based on notions of fictive kinship. Elmolo society is subdivided into seven exogamous segments. Each of these segments recognized an interrelationship between themselves and a particular section in Samburu, Rendille, or Dasenech society.[26] The Elmolo offered no explanation as to the origins of these ties beyond one or two which focused on mythical affinal relations.[27] Their derivation, however, is not particularly important since their usefulness was grounded in the recognition of their existence by the various parties involved. This allowed an Elmolo to claim gifts from members of 'his' section when the Samburu or Rendille brought their livestock to water at the lakeshore, and the Samburu or Rendille to make the same claims of the Elmolo. As described by one Elmolo informant whose section, Orikaltito, shares such a bond with the Lorokichu of the Samburu:

> All are Lorokichu; it doesn't matter which people you are. It doesn't matter if you are Rendille or Samburu, all are Lorokichu...it's just brothers meeting together.... Of course I will be given if I ask. Whatever they ask I will give them and whatever I ask of them they will give to me as they are my section.[28]

In times of economic crisis and social dislocations, these same avenues provided destitute Samburu and Rendille herdsmen and their families with direct access to an alternative economy.

When in 1888, Count Teleki and Lieutenant von Höhnel saw the off-shore fishing communities of 'Elmolo' in the present-day Loiyangalani area, they were told that these communities consisted of Elmolo, Dasenech (Reshiat), Samburu (Burkeneji), and Rendille. Those 'Elmolo' that they later found at Alia Bay appear to have been exclusively the Dies, and their reported imminent departure would not have been as von Höhnel remarked, to buy millet from the Dasenech, but would rather have been to harvest their own ripened crops. This was because, as already noted, the growing of millet along the shore at the northern end of the lake was another aspect of their overall subsistence

[24] See, for example, EHT 1, 2, 3, 5; RHT 5, 9, 10; SHT 33, 76; Cf. Spencer, *Nomads*, 216.

[25] Ngtaliyou at Korangapa Island on 14 July 1976, EHT 2; also EHT 1, 3, 4, 6, 11. Further details on the variety of exchange relations that existed in the Lake Turkana basin in the nineteenth century can be found in Sobania, 'Feasts'.

[26] The seven Elmolo segments with their 'related' section shown in parentheses are: Orikaiya (Longeli?–Samburu), Orikaltite (Gabana of Sale, Rendille), Orikaltito (Lorokichu–Samburu), Orikara (Masula–Samburu), Orisaiyo (Longeli–Samburu), Orisiole (Masula–Samburu), and Marle (Dasenech). See interviews, including EHT 1, 5, 6, 7; SHT 40; RHT 5, 7. Cf. G. Schlee, 'Interethnic clan identities among Cushitic-speaking pastoralists', *Africa*, LV (1985), 17–37.

[27] See especially EHT 5, 14.

[28] Lenapir at Loiyangalani on 17 July 1976, EHT 9; also EHT 5, 7, 14.

strategy.[29] Indeed, the Elmolo claim only to have visited the Alia Bay area to fish and hunt hippo; they deny having ever lived there. Furthermore, they traditionally referred to the Dasenech as 'Guralya' or 'people of Alia', and the island which is sometimes unsubmerged at Alia as 'the island of the Dasenech'.[30] The presence of Samburu and Rendille elements among the Elmolo Bay community in the nineteenth century was no more unusual than was the presence of the same peoples among the Ndorobo communities of the mountains. For the herdsmen of that period geographical and social access to either the hunting Ndorobo or the fishing 'Ndorobo' was comparable. The cultural stigma attached to the eating of fish was no greater than the taint acquired from eating the various fauna associated with the hunter's diet.

In the aftermath of the disastrous epizootics of bovine pleuro-pneumonia and rinderpest, especially when the Samburu began to congregate in the Nyiro–Kulal region with what remained of their stock, the Elmolo received a significant influx of herdsmen who could no longer survive within the pastoral economy:

> the Samburu one day came together in one place but there was drought and a great famine spread all across the people and they lost all their animals and most of them died. And because of this great story most of them came to live with the Elmolo.... We shared what we had, we fished together and we ate fish no matter even if they were warriors. They [Samburu warriors] couldn't boast at that time, we all ate fish.[31]

The traditions of the Elmolo suggest that by having taught the Samburu to fish, the Elmolo provided these refugees with all they required for a rapid recovery: 'They came and lived with the Elmolo and we all ate together. They got a good life again; they left the Elmolo at their place and left for their own places...'[32] The reality of this recovery process was both longer and more complex.

III

The Samburu did indeed become fishermen and learn to make the ropes and nets necessary to pursue this existence. However, they also engaged in activities that were alien to the Elmolo, but which were to prove invaluable to their prospects for survival and return to pastoralism. Of particular note were the hunting and raiding activities which were also associated with other scattered Samburu elements of this period, regardless of whether they had continued as herdsmen or become hunter–gatherers. Fishing alone could not provide access to a renewed pastoral existence, and hunting and gathering served chiefly to supplement the unfamiliar lake-based diet, although no doubt on occasion elephant tusks and rhinoceros horn were also traded for livestock.

[29] L. von Höhnel, *Discovery of Lakes Rudolf and Stefanie* (London 1894), II, 109–16, 127–8, 132–40, 212. The conclusion that it was the Dies at Alia Bay would not of course preclude the presence of absorbed Samburu and Rendille herders and households among them.

[30] See, for example, EHT 6.

[31] Lgilikwi at Loiyangalani on 16 July 1976, EHT 7, and interviews including EHT 2, 3, 4, 6, 11, 13; SHT 33, 40; RHT 7.

[32] Paul at Loiyangalani on 18 July 1976, EHT 11; see also SHT 33.

Raiding played the greatest part in the recovery process of these displaced Samburu, furnishing the capital that was required for the resumption of pastoralism. These raids took the Samburu especially northwards to the Boran, but other neighbours including the Turkana, Dasenech and even the Rendille were also targets. In the end it was the continued predilection of these Samburu refugees for raiding which led the Elmolo to dissociate themselves from their visitors. Essential to the continued existence of these small, relatively defenceless groups of fishermen (and hunter–gatherers) was a peaceful coexistence with their vastly more powerful pastoral neighbours. They could not afford to have this long-recognized reputation discredited through their harbouring of cattle-raiding Samburu. In the long run they would only be the losers if these refugees drew attacks upon the Elmolo settlements:

> And they [the Samburu] came when they were very poor, ate fish and did whatever we did. Before they came to live with us they became hunters and hunted giraffe, rhinoceros, antelope and also ate berries in the bush...They continued to do all this hunting while they were with the Elmolo, but when they started to go and raid other peoples, the Elmolo thought these people might bring some other bad things to us and so told these people, let us divide.[33]

However, before the point was reached which necessitated their dissociation, the presence of the Samburu among the Elmolo had engendered changes amid the latter community which would prove both substantial and lasting.

According to most accounts, the Samburu refugees who took up residence with the Elmolo at the end of the nineteenth century outnumbered their hosts. This is consistent with the population estimates of travellers at the end of the nineteenth century when compared with the accounts from the first decade of the twentieth century. Early twentieth-century estimates consistently reported fewer than one hundred Elmolo. Von Höhnel, in contrast, had recorded between 200 and 300 individuals, and Smith, whose visit took place after the rinderpest, reported 300 and 700 people at two distinct sites. The only intervening events of significance were the return of previously impoverished herdsmen to the pastoral economy.[34]

The intrusion of the Samburu refugees on the Elmolo had a threefold result: intermarriage occurred between the two societies, the Elmolo adopted a number of Samburu cultural features, and the Eastern Cushitic language of the Elmolo began to disappear (see below). Under more usual conditions, an Elmolo man had no hope of obtaining the eight head of cattle which were required as bridewealth to acquire a wife from the Samburu. After constructing a raft (*arte*) for his bride's father, and obtaining a metal harpoon (*mulkisara*) for her mother's brother, he would have married an Elmolo girl. Under the very different conditions which prevailed in the years immediately after the disasters, expedience on the part of the Samburu resulted in different

[33] Karato at Korangapa Island on 15 July 1976, EHT 5; also EHT 13, 18.

[34] See EHT 5, 8; von Höhnel, *Discovery*, II, 111; *idem*, 'The Lake Rudolf region, its discovery and subsequent exploration: 1888–1909', *J. Royal Afr. Soc.*, XXXVII (1938), 29; Smith, *African Countries*, 294n, 332; N. C. Cockburn, 'Route from Baringo to Addis Ababa along the east shore of Lake Rudolf, 21 December 1909–20 April 1910', 3 May 1910; Officer-in-Charge to Chief Secretary, Nairobi, 14 April 1911, both in Kenya National Archives (hereafter KNA)/DC/MBT/5/1.

standards of acceptability: 'They [the Samburu] weren't rich at that time. And since we were all poor [had no stock] we let girls be married freely because neither Samburu nor Elmolo had animals, and so they gave their girls freely without exchanging'.[35] Once, however, the process of recovery for the Samburu was well under way, the need for these close ties between themselves and their Elmolo hosts became less important, and they reasserted their traditional attitudes. Intersocietal marriages continued to occur but their basis once again became livestock.[36]

Hairstyles and other outward aspects of adornment, which were easily copied and discarded much as occurs in fashion elsewhere in the world, were among the Samburu customs which the Elmolo adopted during this period of intimate contact. Of greater significance was the circumcision of four Elmolo 'warriors' with the Terito age-set of Samburu in 1893. In the nineteenth century, traditional Elmolo society did not recognize an age-set system or practise male circumcision. They divided their men into only two divisions, elders (*gurahuda*) and young men (*grerre*).[37] The Samburu circumcision ceremony in which these Elmolo participated took place at Paulo, a mountain north of Elmolo Bay. There is nothing to indicate any coercion on the part of either society. Rather, it epitomizes the nature of the closely linked relationship that existed between the Samburu and Elmolo in that period.[38] It also characterizes the circumstances of the occasion in that the initiation of a Samburu age-set fell during the time of the Samburu sojourn amongst the Elmolo.[39] In the years immediately following the inauguration of the Terito age-set ever-increasing numbers of individuals and families of Samburu began returning to the cattle economy. By the inauguration of the following age-set in 1912 (the Merisho) the Elmolo had 'left' circumcision and not until the Kilmaniki age-set (1948–62) were three young men again found circumcised among the Elmolo.[40]

A number of other changes occasioned by the presence of Samburu refugees among the Elmolo in the late nineteenth century were to prove more lasting. The most obvious concerned language. In a remarkably short time the Nilotic Maa language spoken by the Samburu began to overlay the Eastern Cushitic one spoken by the Elmolo. This change is attributed by the Elmolo to the large number of Samburu who were in their midst. Clearly this provided an opportunity to learn the language, while the various ties that they established, which were to prove especially useful to the Elmolo in terms of later exchanges, encouraged it: 'Since they lived together with the Samburu they did not take

[35] Lengkatuk, EHT 6, and interviews including EHT 2, 5, 7, 11, 16; SHT 33, 40.

[36] There are indications that the Elmolo later acquired stock from bridewealth in this fashion; see, for example, Lt. A. W. S. Lytton, Samburu Handing Over Report 1924, n.d., KNA/DC/NFD/1/9.

[37] See, for example, EHT 1, 4, 7, 9. The Elmolo have traditionally circumcised their women.

[38] See EHT 6, 7, 10; SHT 75, 76.

[39] Every fourteen years a Samburu age-set is inaugurated with the circumcision of all members. Spencer, *Nomads*, 33.

[40] EHT 7, 10; Spencer, *Nomads*, 214. During the lead-up to the initiation in 1976 of the Kurroro age-set, the young men of the Elmolo called themselves warriors, dressed in the black skins of precircumcision youth and in general followed Samburu customs up to and including the initiation ritual of circumcision.

the Elmolo language as important, as the Samburu were the greatest number and they just spoke the Samburu language as the only language'.[41]

Language is frequently a marker of ethnicity and maintained as a distinctive feature of identity. Today the Elmolo consistently emphasized that the Samburu language was 'better' and 'preferred', although it contained none of the specialized vocabulary of the fisherman's craft. A survey of the languages spoken by the parents of present-day Elmolo elders suggests that there was a generation of bi-lingual speakers in the early part of this century followed by a generation of almost pure Samburu speakers whose parents taught them the language as a matter of preference.[42] This partiality on the part of parents who had hosted the Samburu and the decided preference of their children for things Samburu, from language to hair style, is intertwined with subsequent events in the area, in particular with the acquisition of livestock by the Elmolo. This change, while not as pronounced as the shift in language, served to create an incipient pastoral population and, over time, to shift the Elmolo culturally ever closer to the Samburu. Thus, while it was the Samburu who had sought out the Elmolo for refuge and physically moved to join them, by the time they departed from the lake shore they had begun in a cultural sense a process of taking the Elmolo back with them.

IV

While it is apparent that some Elmolo made a conscious choice to encourage the use of the Samburu language, the impact of this decision is unlikely to have engendered a long-term commitment, since traditional subsistence patterns and cultural activities would have undermined it. However, with the arrival of colonial administration at Lake Turkana, this pursuit on the part of some Elmolo received an active boost that soon began to engulf the whole community.

In 1911, a year after the initial establishment at Marsabit of an administrative presence in the region, a government station was opened at Loiyangalani. The purpose of this post on the lakeshore was to protect the region against incursions from the north by Ethiopians. One particular result of the spread of government administration to this region was the protection which was showered on the Elmolo. And as the only settled community in the north, they were the only one to which the government's procedures for administration were appropriate. By this date it appears that most of the Samburu, and the few Rendille refugees who had once lived among the Elmolo, had returned to pastoralism. The Dies no longer lived at Alia Bay, although they did continue to travel south from the Omo to trade. With the government post at Loiyangalani, the Elmolo, who may have been as few as fifty in number, shifted their settlement nearby and began to trade fish to the officers and troops. When in 1915 the post was withdrawn, government patrols continued to maintain

[41] Karato, EHT 5; also EHT 2, 3.

[42] EHT 2, 3, 5, 10, 11, 15; Neumann, *Elephant Hunting*, 265; Stigand, *To Abyssinia*, 224; A. W. S. Lytton, Samburu Handing Over Report 1924, n.d., KNA/DC/NFD/1/9; V. E. Fuchs, 'The Lake Rudolf Valley Expedition (1934)', *Geog. J.*, LXXXVI (1935), 122. In 1976 only four, or possibly five, people had any real knowledge of the old language. Cf. B. Heine, 'Vokabuläre Ostafrikanischer Restsprachen, Teil II: Elmolo', *Afrika und Übersee*, LVI (1973), 276–83.

contact with the Elmolo. They were felt to be in need of government protection because they were in such poor health. One Samburu informant, who as a warrior had accompanied such a patrol to the Elmolo, concluded: 'And so we found that the white men liked these people because they were poor'.[43] And as expressed by the Elmolo: 'Elmolo were their [the Government's] people. They helped all the Elmolo because they liked them'.[44]

The departure of the government post also saw the Elmolo return to the natural protection of their island strongholds in Elmolo Bay. They claim to have done so because they lived in fear of raids from the neighbouring pastoralists, but they also admit that none ever occurred, or at least not until 1921. In that year a party of Samburu warriors raided an Elmolo encampment on the lakeshore near Moite. These warriors appear to have mistaken the fishing camp for a temporary enclosure belonging to either Ethiopians or Boran. The raid was completely out of character for the Samburu and found incomprehensible by the Elmolo.[45] In the raid eight Elmolo were killed. Unconcerned that the Elmolo were fishermen who kept no more than a few head of small stock, the Government awarded them 'blood money' from the Samburu in the form of thousands of sheep and goats: 'Instead of revenge and killing the other people, he [the government administrator] snatched many goats from them, [and] brought them for the Elmolo'.[46] After tracking down the guilty warriors, the authorities confiscated a large number of cattle from their section:

> We [Elmolo] were asked if we would like goats, small stock, or cows, and Elmolo said we liked small stock; we preferred small stock to cattle. All the cattle being brought by the police were exchanged for small stock with the Turkana and they brought the small stock and gave them to the Elmolo. Actually the goats were so many that the people couldn't get them to cross the lake to the islands...but the warriors did a lot of work to cross the lake with the goats and they did that for one and a half days.... That was when we got the first goats.[47]

The small stock were presented to the kin of those killed in the raid and were shared out amongst the relatives. Although they do not appear to have received all the small stock to which they were entitled under this arrangement, the large number that the authorities provided were more than adequate for the establishment of an incipient pastoral population.

From this point on the Elmolo had the means to exist more nearly as equals with their pastoral neighbours, and with the protection that government afforded them, they were able to continue herding and accumulating. The Elmolo placed some of their newly amassed small stock with the herds of their Samburu affines and trading partners. Often a son accompanied the stock to the Samburu and stayed on to learn about herding. On their visits to friends in their section's 'related' counterpart in Samburu and Rendille, the Elmolo

[43] Lemuren Lenaititai at South Horr on 17 Oct. 1978, SHT 76.

[44] Lenapir at Loiyangalani on 9 Oct. 1978, EHT 13.

[45] Cockburn, 'Route from Baringo', and Officer-in-Charge to Chief Secretary of the Administration, 14 April 1911, as cited in n. 34; EHT 2, 6, 10, 13; SHT 76.

[46] Lengkatuk, EHT 6; interviews including EHT 7, 13, 16, 18; Major Muirhead, 'NFD Annual Report, 1922', n.d., KNA/PC/NFD/1/1/2; Capt. E. N. Erskine, 'Samburu handing over report, 1921', n.d., KNA/PC/NFD/1/9/1; A. W. S. Lytton, 'Samburu handing over report, 1924', n.d., KNA/DC/NFD/1/9.

[47] Lengkatuk, EHT 6.

began to resemble the Dies. In exchanges they were no longer satisfied with only the by-products of pastoralism; now they too actively claimed gifts of stock and traded their craft products for sheep and goats. When their daughters married into the neighbouring pastoral communities they collected the bridewealth they were due. They may have also acquired minimal animal husbandry techniques themselves during the residency of the Samburu, and the impoverished Turkana who began to seek refuge among the Elmolo in this later period provided them with an additional source of manpower already knowledgeable in the ways of herding. Indeed, this may have been one of the reasons for their acceptance.[48] As government administration in the district increased, the threat of stock raids lessened. Coupled with their acquisition of greater skills in herding, the Elmolo no longer found it necessary to farm their animals out to the Samburu to be herded far from the lakeshore. Rather, the sheep and goats, and shortly thereafter the cattle which they began to acquire, were integrated into the economic existence of these island dwellers.

It is within the context of these events which followed on the restoration of the Samburu to their cattle economy that the desire of the Elmolo to follow and adopt the Maa-language and other cultural features of the Samburu must be seen. The process begun in the nineteenth century with the acceptance into the Elmolo community of large numbers of refugee herdsmen from the Samburu has today reached a point at which the survival of the Elmolo as a cultural unit is seriously threatened. The belief that the Elmolo will physically die out, a continuous concern from the time of their earliest observers, has never been a serious possibility. On the contrary, the Elmolo population can be shown to have been increasing throughout this century. Spencer's census in 1958 indicated that the Elmolo numbered 143 persons, an increase from 84 in 1934. In 1976, my own census indicated a total Elmolo population of 235; nearly a threefold increase in forty years.[49] At the same time, however, the traditional cultural features of Elmolo society, centred on their fishing and hunting economy, bridewealth payments and language, can be seen to be giving way with increasing commitment to a more pastoral type of existence modelled on that of the Samburu.

SUMMARY

This article examines the unique role played by fishing, hunting and gathering groups in the survival strategy of the pastoralist societies in whose midst they live. During periods of extreme adversity, these groups acted as a refuge for destitute herdsmen and their households by absorbing population in periods of hardship and releasing individuals back into pastoralism when conditions once again allowed the accumulation of stock. Extensive quotations from the historical traditions of the peoples of the Lake Turkana region of northern Kenya are used to detail the recent history of two such fishing communities, the Elmolo and the Dies, the latter being a fishing group within Dasenech society. The epizootics that decimated the cattle herds of East Africa at the end of the nineteenth century are background for examining the interactions of the Elmolo and Dies with their

[48] See interviews including EHT 5, 7, 8, 11, 15; SHT 76; H. G. Oldfield, 'Marsabit Annual Report, 1931', n.d., KNA/PC/NFD/1/2/2.

[49] Spencer, *Nomads*, 214; Dyson and Fuchs, 'The Elmolo', 330. The 235 people in my 1976 census included 137 adults and 98 children not yet old enough to marry.

pastoralist neighbours, the Samburu and Rendille, and the cultural changes initiated during this period. The subsequent changes inaugurated by the imposition of colonial rule are documented and the Elmolo are shown to be a 'dying tribe' in the sense that the traditional cultural features of their society are giving way to a more pastoral existence based on that of their herding neighbours.