

THE BONI: Problems of a Hunting-gathering People

by Daniel Stiles

Much has been written in the pages of "AFRICANA" and other wildlife and conservation magazines about the harm that is caused to wild animal populations by human hunters, invariably referred to as poachers. Wildlife has received an eloquent defence, but what about traditional hunting peoples?

In most cases today an anti-hunter attitude is quite valid, but I want to discuss here certain conditions under which hunting by people is not nefarious, and I am not talking about game-cropping. The point I am going to argue, in fact, is that a total ban on hunting can cause more harm than good to both man and the environment in the long run, in certain situations.

I have been conducting research with traditional hunting peoples for over three

years in Kenya and it is the results of this research that have led me to conclude that hunting is not all bad. Not all hunters kill game exclusively for profit, some hunt for food and cultural reasons as well. A ban on hunting can mean a ban on an entire people's culture and way of life. This is the situation with the Boni people of Lamu District today.

The Boni, who call themselves *Aweer* (which means 'hunter' in their language), live mainly in the forested area between the Tana River in Kenya and the Juba River in Somalia. They speak an Eastern Cushitic language most closely related to Somali and Rendille, but historical linguists estimate that they split from the ancestral group about 2,000 years ago. The term Boni derives from the Somali word *bon*, which refers to people of low caste, who are usually hunters. The Boni probably became a separate group with their own language as a result of their ancestors moving into the coastal forests to take up hunting-gathering as a way of life, leaving pastoralism behind them.

By around 500 A.D. the Boni were probably

a distinct cultural group, or 'tribe'. The reason why they abandoned pastoralism is difficult to know with any certainty, but it most likely involved the fact that hunting and gathering along the coastal strip was both viable and lucrative. Many proto-Boni between 2,000 and 1,500 years ago may have been driven to hunting by natural and man-made disasters wiping out their stock holdings, a process that has been well documented historically with pastoralists.

Lamu District had the second largest elephant population in Kenya in 1978, according to a survey published by the Kenya Rangelands Ecological Monitoring Unit (KREMU) in 1979, and it certainly had a large one in the more distant past. Ivory has been the most important export item from the Juba-Tana region since the Roman times, and other products of the hunt, such as rhino horn and leopard skins, were exported also, in addition to meat and skins that could be traded with local peoples living outside the forests.

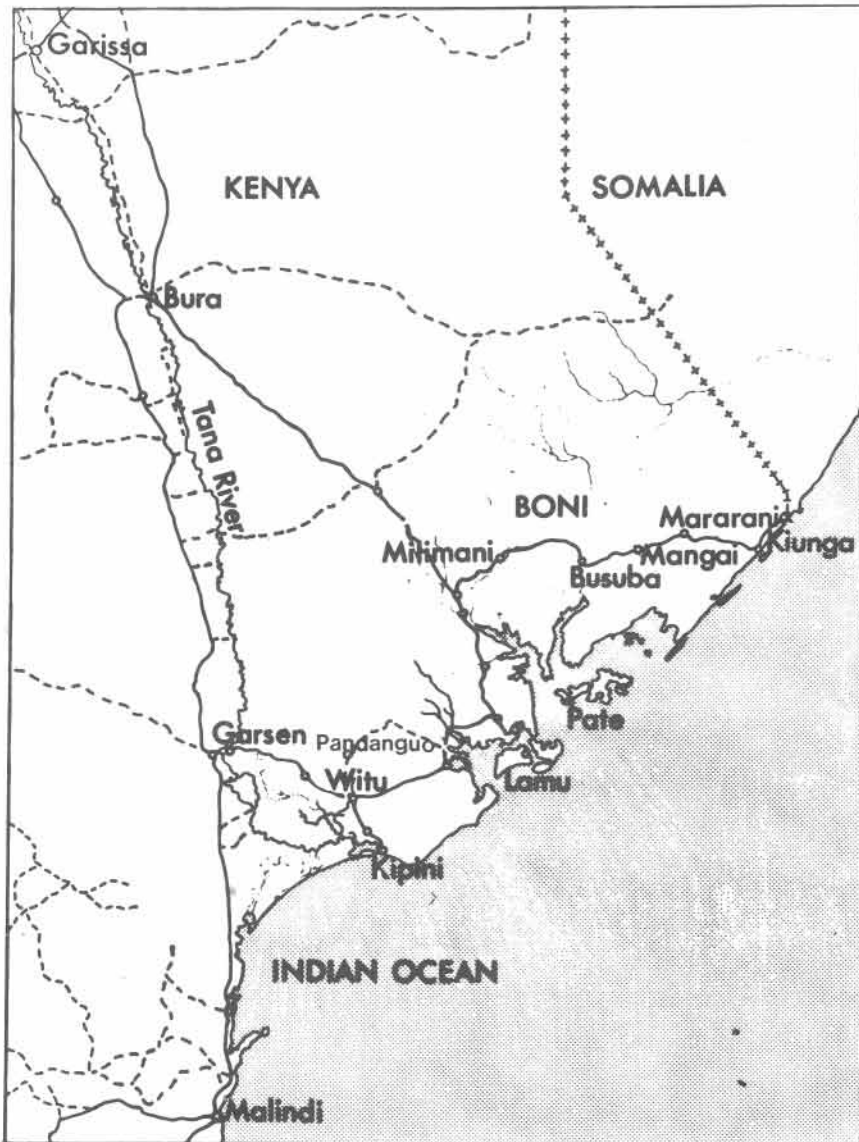
After the 9th Century A.D. with the development of Islamic urban centres along the coast, trade became even more brisk. Cloth, tobacco, and iron could be acquired by exchanging ivory with traders and an environment rich in game and plants supplied abundant food. There was no reason to take up stock-rearing or cultivation and, besides, hunting was enjoyable.

The local ecology undoubtedly had an important part to play as well in the formation of the the Boni as a hunting-gathering people and in the fact that they persisted in this subsistence economy until recent times.

Risky business

The area inhabited by the Boni receives an average of about 650 mm of rainfall annually. This total is in itself enough to support the cultivation of maize, millet, and sorghum. The problem is in the reliability of the rainfall. Variability of precipitation in the Boni Forest is very high, with frequent droughts or floods. A minority of years has the average 650mm of rain, thus agriculture is a risky business. This, along with poor soil fertility (mostly sand), is probably why no agricultural peoples have moved into Boni country, except along the coast and in parts near the Tana River. Likewise, pastoralism is not viable because of heavy infestation of the forest by tsetse flies. The Orma and Somali today rarely enter the forest, and then only during drought periods in search of grazing and water. Given the ecological situation, therefore, a hunting-gathering economy makes the most sense in terms of the value and reliability of return on energy expended.

This map of the coastal part of Kenya north of Malindi shows the main hunting grounds of the Boni people, to the north-west of Lamu, and towards the border with Somalia.



Since the Boni have been hunters for such a long time, hunting has obviously assumed an important place in the socio-cultural system. Traditional life revolves around ritual and ceremonies relating to the hunt. Animals are divided up into small ones (*busha*) and large ones (*dua* or *binansi*). There are different types of arrow-heads and hunting techniques for different game, and until a man kills a *dua* (elephant, rhino, buffalo, or lion) he is called *munese*, meaning inexperienced hunter and, by implication, not yet a man.

When he first kills a *dua* there is a ceremony called *kerar*, in which songs of praise are sung, oil is poured into his hair and onto his shoulders by older women, and he is decorated with ornaments (I was fortunate enough to have observed this ceremony on my last trip into Boni-land). He now becomes a *miso* and is considered a man. A man who is a good hunter with a high success rate of bringing game back to the settlement is called a *hargon* (or *guwe* in some areas), and is highly respected in the community.

Food taboos

The Boni have proscriptions against eating the meat of animals of the dog or cat families, porcupines, rats and monkeys. They used to eat elephants, but with the nominal acceptance of Islam they no longer do so. This initially puzzled me, as the Koran has nothing to say about eating elephants. Upon more persistent questioning, I eventually elicited a response that translated roughly as, "Have you ever tried cutting the throat of a wounded, angry elephant?" This made sense. The Boni hunted traditionally with poisoned arrows, and elephants died slowly and they were dangerous up to the last moment before death.

Today the little hunting that does go on is done more often with the spear, as the Game Department will beat and fine or imprison anyone found with a bow and arrow and poison. The poison was bought from the Giriama who live to the south, and it is just no longer worth the risk of being caught to go and buy it. The poison, called *huwai*, is made from the bark and roots of any of a number of *Acocanthera* species, but the Boni claim that none of them grow in their area.

For food, the most common animal hunted is the topi, with which the forest abounds. Other animals commonly eaten include bushbuck, waterbuck, and zebra. Larger animals, such as buffalo and giraffe, are rarely killed today because of the difficulty of bringing them down with a spear or unpoisoned arrow, though the former is becoming more common to qualify a man as *miso*.

Wild plants

Hunting is linked with the availability of plant foods and the seasons. To the west of the Mangai/Dordori River, the most important wild plant food is furnished by the wild cycad (*Encephalartos hildibrantii*), called *ichele* in Aweer. Fruits (*tiel*) from this tree begin maturing during the long rains about May, and they are gathered in abundance during August and September.

In this period little hunting is done as fruits are plentiful from the *ichele*, a favoured food (dried, pounded and made into bread or gruel), and animals are dispersed. During the dry season much more hunting is done, as plant food is scarce and animals, mainly topi and zebra, congregate into herds, which makes hunting easy along game trails and near

waterholes. There are a large number of wild plant foods, however, that contribute to the Boni diet at various times of the year.

With governmental restrictions on hunting and encouragement of a change to cultivation, begun during the colonial period in the early 20th century and continued today, the Boni have been forced to take up agriculture. As a result their economic and cultural life has suffered, as has the forest ecology to a lesser extent. The Boni practise a typical slash and burn agricultural system, in which new fields are cleared from the forest each year by cutting and burning. I have estimated that this process destroys up to 200 acres of forest each year, which is colonized after the harvest mainly by useless Sodom apple plants (*Solanum incanum*).

Half-hearted attempts

Except for the most southern Boni village of Pandanguo, near Witu, which is a region of more reliable rainfall, the Boni do not make a good living by agriculture and apparently never have. In 1942 George Adamson, then a game warden, travelled through the Boni Forest and reported that the Boni were making only half-hearted attempts at cultivation. In 1957 a Government official was to write: "To say that present agriculture in the Boni area is at subsistence level would be an optimistic statement. It is precarious and submarginal in extreme".

A Kenya Government report shows that Lamu District has the lowest proportion of high potential agricultural land in Coast Province, at little over 1%, and none of this is found in the Boni Forest. On my second visit to Boni country in September of 1978 I found the people to be in miserable condition. The heavy rains had ruined most of the crop and they were awaiting famine relief from Lamu.

So what is to become of the Boni? In the present situation they cannot make a decent living, nor can they practise openly their age-old rituals surrounding the hunting life. In being forced to undertake agriculture they are destroying the forest that provides the home and refuge of tens of thousands of wild animals. The Dordori and Boni Reserves will protect some of this, but only a small proportion. Even the reserves have brought new hardships to the Boni, with the influx of Forestry Department officials.

The Boni used to supplement their meagre income by manufacturing wooden objects for trade with the Somali. They traditionally made stools, headrests, walking sticks, wooden bowls, plates and combs as trade items, but now Forestry workers demand that a person has to have a permit, which of course costs money, to cut down the trees to make objects. If a person is caught with large numbers of wood artefacts without a permit, he is fined. It is all right to cut down the trees on four acres of land and burn them to make a shamba, but it is illegal to cut down one tree in order to carve stools and headrests. Both the *Wa-Gamu* (Game Department rangers) and *Wa-Miti* (Forestry Department) are unreasonable oppressors in the eyes of the Boni.

What would happen if the Boni were allowed to hunt again? The main fear is that they might go back to large-scale trophy hunting, endangering populations of elephant, rhino, and leopard. I firmly believe that this is not probable, nor even possible. The main threat to these animals in the Boni area is from Somali *shifita*, armed with modern weapons, whom the Boni fear as much as anyone.

The Boni have never hunted with rifles, as

far as I have been able to ascertain, and they express no desire to. Legalising hunting for food would not increase Boni hunting of elephant and rhino, because if they want to kill one of these animals today, they can. The same risk as today would prevail in the future for the killing of illegal game.

Elephants are killed by the Boni on occasion today, but only out of extreme need. The principal reason today for risking killing an elephant, which means years in prison if caught, is for bride price. I attended a marriage ceremony a couple of years ago and was told that the entire bride price was 5,000/-, of which 1,500/- had already been paid. I was astounded at such a high figure and asked how the young groom was ever going to find the 3,500/- balance. In response, my informant shrugged his shoulders, smiled and said 'Pembe' (tusks). Considering the infrequency of Boni marriages, certainly not more than five a year among the whole community in Kenya, this did not seem such a heinous crime to me. The entire population of Boni in Kenya numbers about 1,000, which brings me to my next point.

Potential hunters

With a population of little over 1,000 people, there are under 100 potential active hunters. Many of these will not hunt much because, ironically enough, they are increasingly being employed full-time by the Game and Forestry Departments. Whether this will continue, or even remain as it is with the legalization of restricted hunting for food, is not certain, as being a hunter still has high prestige amongst the Boni. Nevertheless, the number of hunters is still going to be low.

The traditional Boni territory in Kenya measures approximately 6,000 square kilometres which works out to about one Boni for every 6 sq. kms, less than one hunter per 60 sq. kms, a lower density than even that of the southern African San (Bushman) population.

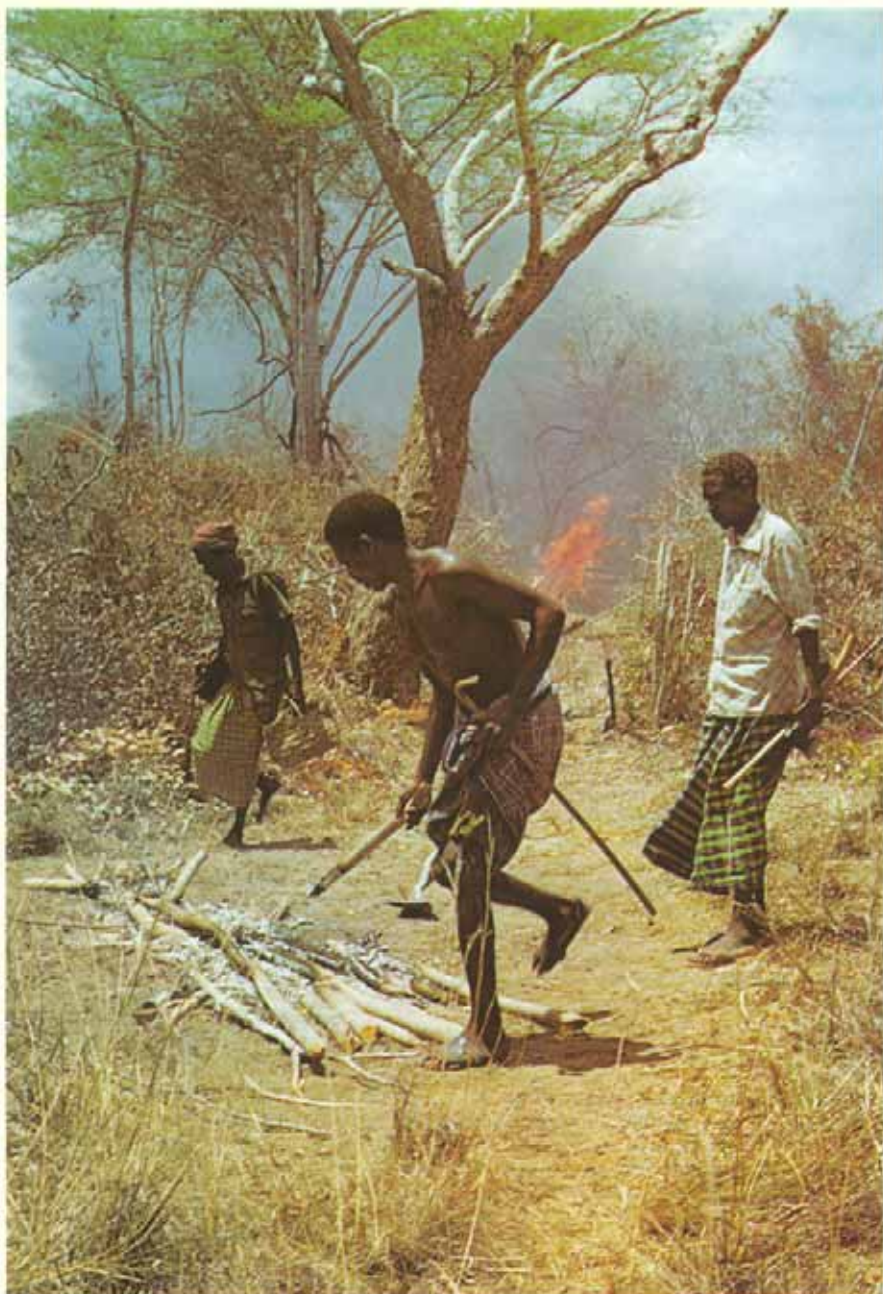
The Boni are well within any standards of ecological carrying capacity of land suggested for hunter-gatherers by numerous authors, and the Boni Forest is an optimum ecology for this subsistence strategy.

In 1980, KREMU estimated that there were over 78,000 topi, about 5,600 zebra, and over 17,000 buffalo in Lamu District, in addition to many thousands of other types of antelopes, pigs, and giraffe. A rough figure of 120,000 wild animals can be suggested as occupying Lamu District, exclusive of elephant and rhino. All of these animals are located within the hunting territory of the Boni, except for a small area around Mpekaton and Mkunumbi, which is occupied by settled agriculturalists and the Dahalo hunting peoples. That calculates to 20 animals per square kilometre, one of the densest concentrations of wildlife in the country.

Animals hunted

Steven Harvey, working with the Boni of Pandanguo in 1975-76, obtained some figures on the number and types of animals hunted. Roughly, one can estimate that 87 topi, 21 zebra, 15 waterbuck, and 21 other non-trophy animals were killed for food in one year for a population of a little under 200 people.

Hunting is more frequent in the Boni villages to the north, as Pandanguo is more successful agriculturally, but even if we increase the number of animals killed by 50%, for a population of 200 people, we arrive at a figure of about 225 animals killed a year.



The Boni do most of their hunting in the dry season, but have to be careful of the risk of fires spreading through the dry woodland country which is their chief habitat also, sheltering the wildlife they depend upon.

Water is a constant problem for the Boni who depend at times on doubtful sources such as this hole dug in a dried up river bed.



Multiply this by five, to account for the entire Boni population, and we arrive at a total of 1,125 animals killed a year, and this is probably an overestimation of the medium-size game.

Smaller animals, such as dik-dik and duiker, added to this might swell the annual total to approximately 1,500 animals. This amounts to 1.25% of the total game population, not counting trophy animals. In an environment as rich in vegetation as the Boni forest, the wild animal population should be able to sustain an annual offtake by hunting of 1.25% without any deleterious effects. Even if we assume that the frequency of hunting will increase twofold with legalization, a 2.5% annual offtake is still harmless, as long as it is equally distributed by game type or, as would be more likely, it is concentrated on the high population species.

Best estimates

The figures cited above are admittedly uncertain, but given the data available, they are about the best estimates that can currently be made. A more detailed wildlife census and study of Boni hunting patterns would have to be made to be more accurate, but the conclusions would be the same: subsistence hunting will not endanger the wildlife. Wild animals are in more danger from the destruction of their habitat by slash and burn agriculture. Rare animals, such as the bongo, okapi, and lesser kudu, would become extinct along the coast without the protection and favourable environment that the forest provides. The Boni have been hunting in the forest for 2,000 years or so, and none of these animals have yet been threatened.

It is a different story for the elephant and rhino, and these animals should continue to be protected by stringent laws. The Boni will undoubtedly poach occasionally, regardless of the law, but not in numbers high enough to pose a demographic threat. The real menace are *shifia* poachers.

In 1972 the elephant population of Lamu District was estimated at over 21,000. By 1977 the number was reduced to a little over 11,000 and by 1978 to an estimated 6,378. The 1980 KREMU estimate is less than 2,500! This makes a reduction of nearly 90% in six years, almost 15% a year from the 1972 population. The Boni certainly contributed to this reduction, but they were small time with their bows and poisoned arrows when compared to Somalis, armed with AK-47s and 303s. If the Boni were allowed to hunt, and if their attitude was pro-government, they could be of great assistance in locating the *shifia* bands that are decimating the elephant herds.

The balance of man with nature would be restored by allowing the Boni to revert to a hunter-gathering existence, the speed of the destruction of the forest would diminish, and the Boni traditional culture would be strengthened. It is a more viable and rational existence than one envisaged by bureaucrats interested in 'progress and development', which in some cases leads to destruction and poverty. I would urge that knee-reflex opposition to hunting be reconsidered in the light of a more thorough understanding of the ecological and cultural consequences of a total ban.