HISTORICAL INTERRELATIONSHIPS OF THE BONI WITH PASTORAL PEOPLES OF SOMALIA AND KENYA

by Daniel Stiles

The main objective of this article is to offer an outline of Boni history that can be used as a framework for orienting future research concerning in general the entire Juba-Tana region and in particular present and former hunter-gatherer populations. Very little research of an historical or socio-cultural nature has been done in this region and therefore the ideas presented here are of necessity of a speculative nature.

The Boni, who call themselves Aweer, live today in the Lamu District of Kenya and in southern Somalia. They occupy a lowland forest environment which receives from between 650-750 mm rainfall on average annually, but variability is high. There are only nine villages in Lamu District that are entirely or mostly made up of Boni, and three other Bajuni villages that have Boni minorities. Villages vary in size from about 60 to 200 people. My informants told me of two other Boni villages located along the Bucbus river in Somalia, which debouches at Bur Gavo, and some are supposed to live in Barawa. Von der Decken (1871), Puccioni (1936), Grotsenelli (1955a) and others discuss Boni living along the Juba river, but my informants say that they know of none who live there now. The number of Boni in Kenya probably totals less than 2,000, and the number in Somalia is unknown.

The Boni speak an Eastern Cushitic language belonging to a group called by Heine (1978) the Sam, which includes also Somali and Rendille. They are traditionally hunters and gatherers, and suggestions have been made that the word Boni derives from the southern Somali word bon, which refers to low caste bondsmen who often were hunters (Puccioni 1936). Similar social types exist in northern Somalia, the Midgaaan, and along the middle Juba, the Ribe. The Boni (Aweer) are the only one of these groups that have been documented to speak a distinct language of their own, not an argot, and one can assume that this has some historical significance. Other low caste groups (sab) engage in a variety of other occupations, such as metal-working, tanning, burying the dead, bartering, circumcising etc. The Boni of Kenya are not now specialists for others in any of these activities, nor is there anything in their traditions that suggests that they ever were. It is possible, if not probable, that peoples other than Aweer have been called Boni in Somalia by various writers, much in the same way as Sanye or Wata has been applied indiscriminantly to hunter-gatherers in Kenya. I shall use Boni to refer to Aweer-speaking peoples.

Some earlier writers believed that all the low-caste hunting groups found amongst Cushitic-speakers are remnants of a pre-Cushitic population, the Aborigines of East Africa (Cerulli 1957; Jensen 1960; Puccioni 1936; Lewis 1960). Some later writers have suggested that they are of much more recent origin, deriving from a Somali population occupying the Juba-Tana region who were dispersed by Oromo (Galla) immigration in the 17th century (Turton 1975; Morton in press). Recent linguistic studies show the picture to be more complex (Ehret 1974; Sasse 1975; Heine 1977, 1978).
Heine (1978: 47-48) suggests a sequence of events as follows:

Roughly at the beginning of the Christian era, probably during the first three centuries A.D., the Proto-Sam-speaking people began to spread in a south-eastern direction. These movements led past the Lorian Swamps to the Tana River and along its eastern banks to the Indian Ocean, thus making the whole of north-eastern Kenya, from Lake Turkana to the Lamu Archipelago a Sam-speaking territory.

The Eastern Sam continued with their migrations in the same way as the earlier Sam people; once a new territory was occupied, part of the population would settle down whereas another part moved on looking for new grazing areas. The Sam-speaking area thus was continually extended...

Upon reaching the coastal area, the expansion of Eastern Sam people proceeded in a northern direction into what is today the Republic of Somalia. The linguistic history records two important break-offs from the main stream of expansion. The first involves those groups that, due to unknown circumstances, were forced to give up animal husbandry and decided on a hunter-gatherer existence in the forest belt to the coastal hinterland north of the Tana River. They are the only Eastern Sam people on Kenyan territory that survived the invasion of the Galla. Their modern descendents are the various Boni-speaking groups.

The second major section that stayed behind, and became largely sedentary, is represented linguistically by "Janji".

Reconstructed vocabulary suggests that the Proto-Sam were camel pastoralists. After the Janji-speakers settled between the Juba and Webi Shebelle rivers the remaining Eastern Sam continued north.

Questions of historical interest are the following:

1) How and why did one segment of the population become hunter-gatherers?
2) Are the Boni of today descendents of the original Eastern Sam split that took place some time early in the first millennium A.D.?
3) What were Boni relationships with succeeding pastoral neighbours?
4) How did the Boni manage to maintain their language?

Huntingford (1963) has made an interesting distinction in the types of hunter-gatherer societies seen today in East Africa. He calls them Bushmen and Symbiotic Hunters, the former referring to surviving groups of Khoisan-speaking hunters and the latter referring to groups that have been acculturated to Nilotic (dorobo) or Cushitic (wata) speaking pastoralists. He also makes an ecological distinction between them. The "Bushmen" (represented today in East Africa by the Sandawe and Hadza) live in open areas and the Symbiotic Hunters live in forests. Symbiotic Hunters do not live by hunting and gathering alone, but enter into exchange relationships with surrounding peoples, which usually results in the hunters adopting the language and many of the traditions of the dominant neighboring community. The close economic relations between the two types of society also usually result in complex social interrelationships developing, with the hunting group emerging as subservient to the dominant pastoral group. Todd (1978) has discussed in more detail how these low caste groups may have originated. He believes that it is more likely that they originated by internal social differentiation within any given society rather than by "mutualistic specialization", which means that different groups adapted to different environments, or they are remnant groups. These are all valid alternative hypotheses to explore.

Another social aspect not yet considered in the literature to explain the creation of and, in particular, the maintenance of low status and "polluting" caste groups is the mechanism of casting out when an individual seriously contravenes a social norm. Female outcasts are created when a girl becomes pregnant prior to marriage or a married woman exceeds the fairly tolerant standards of fidelity in marriage by blatant promiscuity. Males might be cast out of society by not fulfilling proper obligations with kin, not settling disputes in the way agreed upon by the elders, etc. Children born out of wedlock become outcasts and often are said by informants to be left out in the bush to their fate.
Before the intervention of outside modern influences, these outcasts usually joined *wata* groups, including the "abandoned" infants, who were adopted by a *wata* family. Eastern Cushitic people are particularly strict about their marriage rules. The most important rule, never contravened, is a prohibition on marrying someone from one's own clan. Since the clan origins of *wata* are suspect, due to their known prodigality of adopting any convenient one to suit local circumstances, a true pastoralist could never be certain of which clan he/she was marrying into if a *wata* was accepted as a marriage partner. I think that this clan "impurity" of *wata* might partially explain the strong taboo against a pastoralist marrying a *wata*, and it could also explain the maintenance of low caste groups and their inability, until recently, of integrating themselves into pastoralist society through marriage.

The archaeological record tells us that much of East Africa and the Horn was occupied by hunting peoples before the arrival of Cushitic pastoralists. Linguistics suggest that Khoisan-speakers did occupy part of eastern Africa before the arrival of the various present day linguistic groups. Ehret (1974) has proposed that pastoral Southern Cushites expanded into East Africa beginning by at least 2,000 B.C., displacing and/or absorbing Khoisan-speaking hunters. The presence of Dahalo in a small area of Lamu District adjacent to the Boni suggests that at one time this area contained both Khoisan and Southern Cushitic-speaking peoples. The Dahalo today speak a Southern Cushitic language that contains a dental click, thought to be a residual Khoisan trait, and they have traditions indicating a long standing occupation of the area (i.e. no migration legends, and traditions of having been there before any of the surrounding peoples) (Ehret 1974; Stiles, 1980a).

To begin answering the questions posed earlier, we must now visualize scattered groups of Proto-Sam camel pastoralists moving to the east and southeast from the Marsabit District area of northern Kenya about 2,000 years ago (where and how camels were adopted is another intriguing question). They moved past the Lorian Swamp and, according to Heine (1978), followed the Tana to the Indian Ocean. I find it extremely unlikely that camel pastoralists went through the humid coastal belt. The type of vegetation and the presence of tsetse flies are both inimical to penetration by camels. The Portuguese failed in the 16th century when mounting large expeditions into the interior with camels and horses because of the tsetse (Lambrecht 1964). It is much more likely that the pastoralists remained outside the forest belt and that movement was simultaneously east and south, forming a fan originating in the area north of Marsabit. I think that Proto-Sam could have been crossing the Juba River at much the same time that some of them were adapting to coastal forest environments. We do not have to resort to single linear migrations to explain language divergence.

It is also unlikely that these people were exclusively camel pastoralists, as all archaeological evidence to date shows cattle to have been present long before camel in northern Kenya (Phillipson 1977; Stiles 1981a, 1984), and today camel pastoralists usually have cattle. It is quite possible, as Allen (1980) has suggested, that the northern Eastern Sam were predominantly camel herders and the southern portion (if there was one) came to depend on cattle. In any case, some of these early Sam began to give up pastoral pursuits and to enter a forest environment to take up hunting as a subsistence economy. Why?

The forest strip in the past was probably much wider than at present and certainly more dense (Moomaw 1960), and probably extended to the north at least as far as the Busbusi river. Today it has been reduced by cultivators and pastoralists clearing land for agriculture and grazing. It was never a tropical forest, however, because of the highly variable rainfall, and as a result it probably contained a richer large herbivore population than normally is found in forests. Vegetation diversity in the ecotone between the forest and shrub savannah of the hinterland would (and does) result in high faunal diversity. The Boni forest once had the second largest elephant population in Kenya (Stelfox et al. 1979; Stiles 1983) and it is likely that this region had a large elephant population in the distant past. The forest fringe environment, therefore, would offer rich grounds for hunting.
One cannot view subsistence economies characterized by the terms hunter-gatherer, pastoral, agricultural, or fishing as being mutually exclusive. It is well documented that people depend today on a wide variety of resources and strategies, adapted to suit local ecological conditions within the cultural and technological limits of the society. Early pastoralists no doubt engaged in hunting, as many of them still do today, and the presence of wild animal bones in archaeological sites of early pastoralists suggest this (Phillipson 1977; Stiles 1980b and c). Studies have shown how some pastoral people lose their stock due to ecological stress, raiding, etc. today, and at times in the past this must have occurred as well. One response is for these people to become hunter-gatherers (dorobo, wata).

If we view the rich forest-savannah ecotone as one already being exploited by pastoral hunters then it is not difficult to envisage some of these people, whether by choice or circumstance (e.g. losing stock), coming to depend on it for a living. This process would have been facilitated if Todd’s internal social differentiation had already occurred. Mutual specialization may have been carried on for some time, with exchanges of meat, skins, etc., for milk and milk products, but as these Proto-Aweer moved further into the forest, away from the fringes, contacts with the pastoralists became less frequent. If a shegat (patron-client) type of relationship had existed it must have been broken for the Boni language to have diverged and developed on its own. We must remember that the forest was much larger at this time.

Aside from rich hunting, which would have allowed an easier life than pastoralism, these early Boni may have been participants in the earliest recorded ivory trade along the eastern African coast, which would have stimulated people to move away from the hinterland forest fringes towards the coast. Ptolemy describes an emporium, or trading centre, at Nikon (probably Bura Gavo) from which ivory and other products of the hunt were probably obtained by about 400 A.D., precisely the time when the earliest Eastern Som would have been in the area (Mathew 1963).

After this time other peoples began moving into the Juba-Tana area and beyond. Bantu agriculturalists moved up from the south, arriving in the Juba river area possibly as early as the 8th or 9th century A.D. There is no real archaeological or linguistic evidence as to when they might have reached the Juba, but some were likely to have been in the Mombasa area by 300 A.D. (Soper 1971). Other people began arriving from the Arabian peninsula and possibly the Persian Gulf to trade and settle by at least the 9th century (Chittick 1971: 119). From these sources a coastal urban society began to emerge in the Juba-Tana area, known in many local traditions as Shungwaya. Its precise nature and geographical boundaries, if it indeed ever existed, have yet to be determined. The actual ruins of Shungwaya, as described by Haywood (1927) and Grottanelli (1955b), have not been excavated.

Boni oral traditions state that only they and the Bajunis lived in Shungwaya, and this is supported by the Dahalo (Stiles, field research). The oral traditions of the Bajuni, Mijikenda, Pokomo, and Sengaju, however, are adamant that they were also all there (Spear 1977; Nurse 1980), but it is unlikely that the Boni picked up the Shungwaya legend from any of them. This is not a paper about Shungwaya and so I shall concentrate on what the Boni may have been doing between the 10th and late 16th century, when all people concerned agree that Shungwaya came to an end.
We can imagine a Bajuni/Swahili type of society based on commerce and Islam emerging in the coastal towns by perhaps the 13th century, though none of the ruins have been securely dated. Pastoralists, maybe Jabra-Speaking, are in the interior, along with Bantu-speaking agriculturalists. If the towns were being supported by the agriculturalists then one would expect them to be situated near arable land. The Boni are in the forests and they are continuing to supply ivory to the coastal settlements as they were centuries earlier. It is probable that they were doing this via pastoral and/or agricultural middlemen. Again, one cannot say whether a caste-like relationship had yet emerged, but it is more likely now than previously. The arrival of the Oromo changed the situation.

Whatever organization that previously existed was broken down and people began to migrate south and to the off-shore islands. It is interesting that Boni traditions differ from those of the Bajunis and Bantus who have a Shungwaya legend. The latter remember the abandonment of Shungwaya as due to wars with Oromo, but the Boni whom I have interviewed had no such remembrances in their oral traditions. They said that they left Shungwaya because of overcrowding and a lack of game, and that there were many Boni graves from deaths. The Bajunis left Shungwaya at the same time as well, but my Boni informants were unclear as to why. (The Bajunis are quite clear about it — they left because of the Oromo invasion.) The Oromo must have been in the area as my informants claim that at this time the Boni would set upon Bajunis and sell them and their property to the Oromo. Before this time the Boni say that the Oromo were not in Shungwaya. The Boni who remained with the Bajunis when they fled to the islands are today known as the Wakatwa; the Boni who stayed in the southern Somalia forests are called Kilii, and the Boni who later associated with the Somalis are called Garra. Kilii and Garra were also given to me as southern Somalia Boni clan names, but this requires field investigation for confirmation. The dialect differentiation between Kilii and the other Boni which Heine (1982) notes probably occurred at this time, i.e. in the 16th century.

Following the destruction of Shungwaya the Boni reached their present area in Lamu District and began interrelating with the Oromo ancestors of today’s Orma (Warday), who taught them to build the type of houses they use now. The oral traditions are unclear about whether the Boni from Shungwaya joined Boni already living in the Lamu area, whether they preceded the Orma into the area, or whether they...
Boni house building is very similar to the present day Boran, a legacy of close contact with early Oromo immigrants to the coast.

actually came with them. Ethnographic evidence, however, points to the fact that a relatively long and close association between the Boni and Orma developed. Boni clan names are the same as those found with the Orma; some personal names are the same, and various social institutions are modeled on the Orma (Stiles 1981b). One Boni sub-group, the Kijee, are said to be made up largely of former Oromos who joined the Boni. Kijee is the Boni name for Oromo (Stiles 1980a). There are also word borrowings from Oromo in Boni (Heine 1977; Nurse pers. comm.). The Boni had obviously entered into a relationship with the Orma similar to the one that the Wata of northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia have with the Boran, Gabra and other groups. The principal difference is that, unlike northern Kenya and coastal Wata (Wariangulo), the Boni did not lose their language.

I think that some Boni may have lost their language and adopted Orma. These would have been the Boni who were in closest contact with the Orma, and this process would have begun in more open areas, where the Orma could graze their cattle. The Orma most likely skirted the Boni forest, as the Eastern Sam before them did, when moving from the north. Cattle today cannot survive in the forest for long periods without dips and veterinary care. Boni in the forest adopted Orma ways due to close economic contacts, but because daily intercourse was not required by the majority they retained their language. If the Galla migrations were caused by drought, as some believe, then the Boni would have been highly sought after as a provider of food for the pastoralists. In subsequent years some Orma even joined the Boni, probably due to reasons similar to those that resulted in the emergence of the Boni to begin with. Other peoples, such as runaway slaves, may possibly have joined Boni groups, but essentially the Boni of today are the descendants of the Eastern Sam-speaking people of 2,000 years ago.

In the 19th century Somali incursions into the area forced the Orma across the Tana river and thus the
Boni-Orma association was broken. The Somalis replaced the Orma economically but not socioculturally. Even today the Boni feel closer culturally to the Orma than to the Somalis. If hunting was allowed and if Somalis had freedom of movement into the area, however, the Boni would be expected to establish closer social ties with them as the economic ties strengthened.

In this brief sketch of Boni history many questions have been left largely unanswered. Research on the Boni and related peoples is urgently needed in southern Somalia before the knowledge of the past is lost entirely.

NOTES

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1. Village censuses made in 1978, 1979, 1980 and 1981 indicated a population of about 1,200 true Boni. I wish to thank the University of Nairobi and the British Institute in Eastern Africa for support which made the research possible.

2. The Bantu have a term waruwa that seems to a similar type of people.

3. Similar economic relationships have been found between hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists, but the social relationship does not seem to have become as institutionalized as that seen with pastoral societies.

REFERENCES


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Dr. Daniel Stiles has lived in Kenya since 1977. His archaeological and anthropological research on pastoral and hunter-gatherer peoples focuses on the relationship between man and his environment. He is a keen photographer and his pictures included in this article are typical of his interest in showing people at work.