

# Vanishing Grass: Samburu Camel Herders

by Daniel Stiles

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The Samburu have responded to the increasing desertification of their environment with a strategy that promises to benefit both them and the wildlife which share their land.

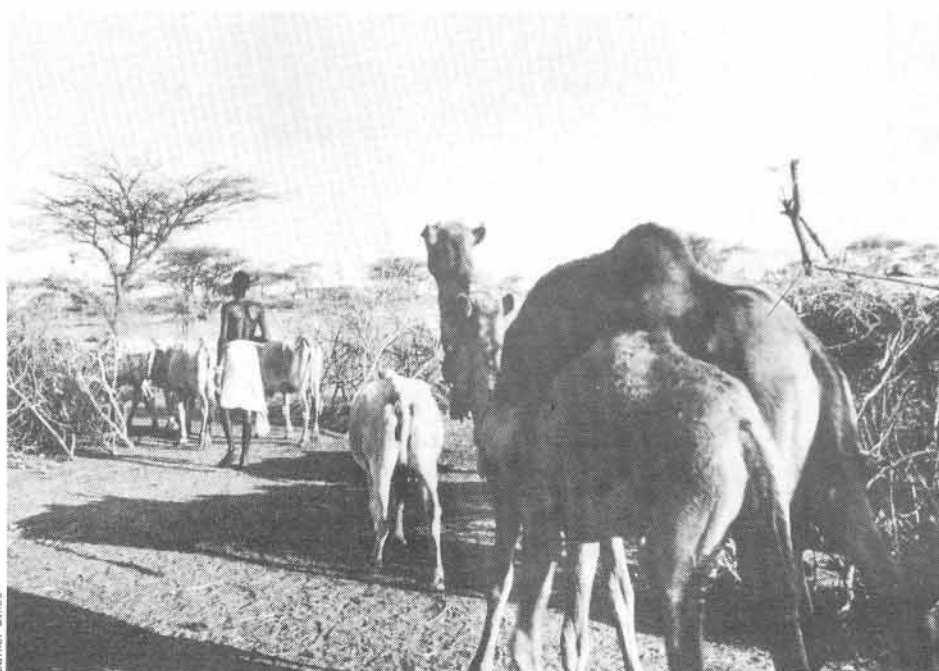
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Lmereso Lolmaakar, bent with age and leaning heavily on his walking stick, squinted at me through rheumy eyes and in response to my question said, 'No, no I don't have any camels, and I don't want any camels. I don't know how to care for them and I'm too old to learn. I know they eat leaves. . . not grass like cattle.'

Many other Samburu are not too old, however, and many do want camels — very badly.

Why do the Samburu, northern cousins of the Maasai and like them a traditionally cattle-herding people, now want camels? Lmereso said the key words: 'They eat leaves'. Samburiland, running from the southern end of Lake Turkana and Mt. Kulal in the north to the Leroghi Plateau and the Uaso Nyiro river in the south, is running low on grass. Grass is the staple food of cattle.

I have been going up to the Turkana area on-and-off now since 1971. Whenever I saw people south of Marsabit with camels I just assumed they were Rendille or Ariaal, not knowing much about how to distinguish them from Samburu. But when I began to see people herding camels near Archer's Post in 1979, at the very southern extent of Samburu country, I began to get very curious. What were camels doing way down here? I asked a few questions and, indeed, the Samburu are now beginning to adopt camels. I went to Wamba to find out more.



Turanta Longkoniek taking his camels out to graze along with his cattle.

There have been a few camels in Samburiland for many years, but it is only within the last ten years or so that the Samburu have been making a concerted effort to get more camels, and probably only within the last five years that some younger men have begun to think about putting together serious subsistence herds, relegating cattle to the minority position.

For an anthropologist this is an exciting event. The adoption of camels signals the beginning of a major change that, if allowed to run its full and natural course, will result in important changes in Samburu social structure, customs, and relationships with the land in which they live.

'The land has turned,' said Lmereso shaking his grizzly old head. 'When I was a boy being initiated into the Kiliako age-set (1921-22) this land was green, there was abundant grass and water and the trees were more beautiful. We could

stay in one *enkang* (settlement) for ten years and graze cattle around it. Now the cattle have to be taken away long distances and *lalei* (seasonal camp for bulls, steers and dry cows) lasts for much longer than it used to.'

In other words, environmental degradation—desertification—is forcing change away from full dependence on cattle. Most of Samburu country is far from being a desert, however. Acacia woodland with sparse shrubs provides an adequate cover of bush—but cattle do not thrive on bush. Camels do. Overgrazing and trampling by countless animals (mostly sheep and goats) have denuded the understorey and compacted the ground. When it rains the results are unabated runoff and erosion wherever there is a slope, which in the undulating country around Wamba is a very large proportion of the land.

The recent desertification of Samburiland has not been caused by climatic



*Gerunuk can compete successfully with livestock because they can reach browse 100 high for goats.*

deterioration. A comparison of rainfall records of each decade since the 1920s for northern Kenya shows that droughts similar to those experienced in the 1970s have occurred in the past. The real cause of the environmental degradation is the great increase in human population in the region. This increase in people has been accompanied by a large increase in the domestic animals necessary to feed the people.

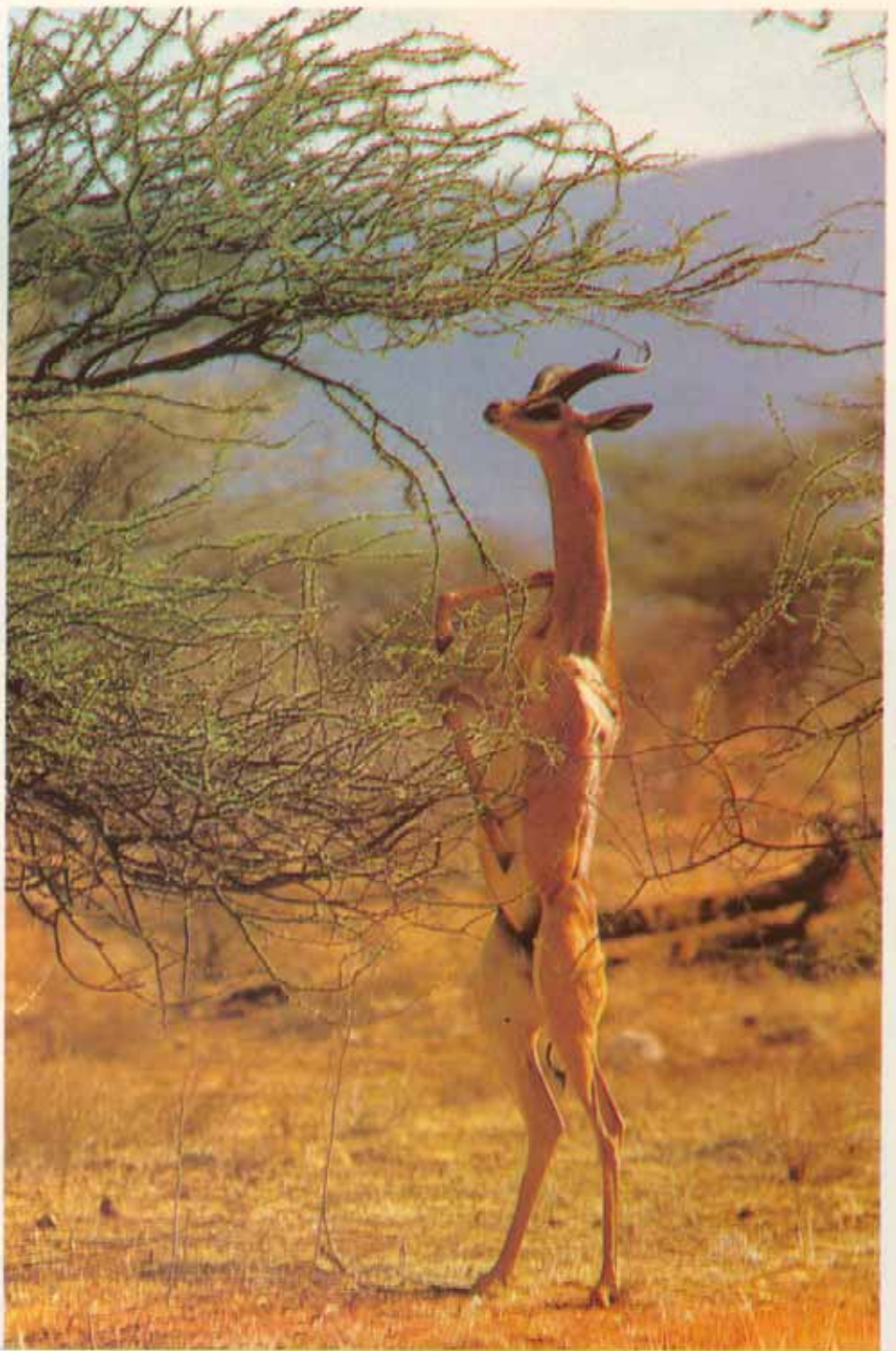
The main cause of human population density increase is the compression of the Samburu people into an ever shrinking area. In the late 19th century the Gabbra and Boran poured into northern Kenya from Ethiopia and forced the Samburu and Rendille south. The often hostile Turkana have put pressure on Samburu grazing lands in the west since the mid-19th century up to the present day, and bands of *shifita* raiders have more recently made large tracts of land near Merille and east of the Isiolo-Marsabit road unsafe for grazing. Expropriation of good grazing land for European settlement to the south on the Laikipia Plateau was made during the colonial era, and the Samburu Game Reserve alienates even more land. The Samburu probably have 30-40 per cent less grazing land than they had at the beginning of the century, and human and livestock numbers have grown considerably. A recent German study estimates that the Wamba area is about 150 per cent overstocked.

The impact on the wildlife has also been very deleterious. The increased density of manyattas and people with herds has been squeezing wild animals out, many probably migrating into the Samburu/Buffalo Springs Game Reserves. Poaching has also been a serious problem in the area as more poor people are created by hard times engendered by the basic fact of not enough grass. Cattle die because they are undernourished, because they are undernourished milk production is low, so not everyone can be fed: poor people.

Poor people traditionally turn to selling (and eating) wildlife products in order to subsist. Elephant and rhino populations have been particularly hard hit, as recent air and ground surveys have shown. The Samburu/Buffalo Springs Game Reserves have acted as extremely important centres of protection for wildlife, though even there animals are subject to poaching.

An indication that there has been a reduction in numbers of small ungulates — various types of antelope and gazelle — is the increased predation on livestock by lions and hyenas reported by the Samburu. Lions and hyenas tend to stick to specific territorial ranges and

*Dikdik are well-adapted for living in dry, rocky or sandy environments where there is little or no grass.*



David Keith Jones



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*Reticulated Giraffe are found in the drier, northern parts of Kenya.*

*Turanta's wife milking a camel.*

they do not normally follow migrating animals out of their territories. The fact that these carnivores are now increasing their frequency of attacks on livestock strongly suggests that there just aren't as many wild prey around as there used to be. Competition with cattle for sparse grazing has reduced the zebra numbers in the Wamba lowland area and these animals are now found in large numbers

on the grasslands of the Leroghi Plateau. Now camels are coming in to take advantage of the abundant leaves on trees and shrubs left by the reduction of browsing wildlife — leaves found above the 1.2 metre height limit of goats, that is.

'Camels are very easy to graze,' Turanta Longkoniek remarked. 'I just take them out with the cattle. They don't eat the same things, but I don't have

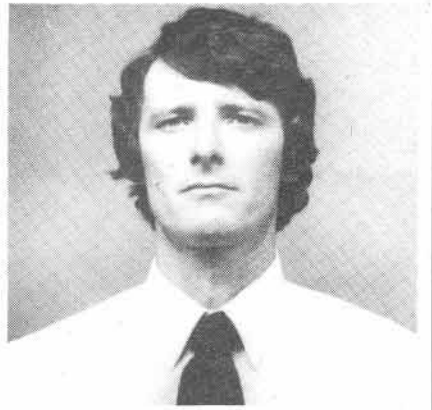
anyone to look after them separately.'

Turanta, a man of about 40, has only two children old enough to herd. The boy looks after the goats and sheep while the daughter helps her mother to gather firewood, collect water, and take care of the younger children. The camels don't go with the goats, whose diet is much more similar, because camels don't like goats and will try to step on them, and they move at different speeds. Labour is a

*These waterbuck would have to seek a new home if livestock were allowed to graze along the whole length of the Uaso Nyiro River because the long grass in which the newly-born waterbuck hide would be destroyed.*







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He obtained his Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, and has done research in many countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. He has made several research trips to northern Kenya, and to Lamu District to work with the Boni. He was a lecturer in archaeology at the University of Nairobi from 1977 to 1981.

problem, and it will get more serious as the number of camels in Samburu households increases. His brother usually keeps his camels, but Turanta has brought a milch camel and her offspring to his *enkang* because of the milk.

'Camels give milk four times a day, and even in the dry season they keep giving. With the drought my cattle no longer can feed my family. I want more camels, but I can't afford to buy any more,' said Turanta.

The main way for Samburu to acquire camels seems to be by purchasing them from the Turkana in Baragoi. The Rendille will very rarely ever sell a camel, and never a female.

What does the future hold in store for the Samburu and for the wildlife that shares the land with them?

This is a difficult question to answer because they are competing pressures on the Samburu. As a traditionally pastoralist people their internal response would be in terms of pastoralism: they would shift to become predominantly camel pastoralists, as have other people before them, adapting to an increasingly barren environment. This is what many of the Turkana did in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it is what the precursors of those we know today as the Rendille and Gabbra did even longer ago in the past.

Archaeology tells us that cattle pastoralism in the far north of Kenya is considerably older than camel herding. Camels have been progressively moving south from out of the Horn for centuries. They have now reached the Uaso Nyiro river and the shores of Lake Baringo, a living indicator of a dying environment. Former cattle herding people took up camels from Somali-speaking peoples in response to environmental degradation. It has been going on in Kenya for at least a thousand years, creating social groupings with new cultural identities, and it is continuing.

There are also external pressures on the Samburu for change in the form of development projects, which will try and create alternative forms of livelihood: irrigated and dryland farming, bee-keeping to produce honey (presently the domain of the Dorobo, a low caste group), the tanning of hides, and, the most important, the selling of large numbers of stock and full-scale entrance into the cash economy. How to motivate pastoralists to want to sell their animals and then what they are to do with the consequent large amounts of money are as yet unsolved problems. The aim of the projects is sensible, to get excess livestock (in terms of the carrying capacity of the land) off the burdened vegetation. This might not, however, affect the root cause of overstocking: human population increase. That will undoubtedly continue.

I would strongly support the more traditional response, and would even advise helping to accelerate the process by assisting the Samburu to acquire camels. The camel is the least deleterious livestock animal that exists in northern Kenya in terms of impact on the vegetation. When camels feed they spread out, reducing the harm caused by trampling hooves. Cattle and small stock trails often result in gullying and large-scale erosion during the rains in areas where grass and herbs have been overgrazed. The diet of the camel is well balanced between all storeys of the vegetation cover, thus no one type of vegetation is depleted. Camels are also much superior producers of milk and are more efficient at converting plant matter into milk, so more people can be fed on less vegetation consumed.

If the number of cattle and small stock could be reduced by increasing camel numbers, the vegetation would benefit considerably. Lower livestock density would also create more room for wild animals, furthering their chances for survival. The final, and one of the most important, plus points of the camel is that it has a much slower reproduction rate than cattle or small stock. Studies have shown that camel pastoralists have social practices that slow human reproduction rates down to the level of camel herd growth, so as not to outstrip food production. It is an important point to understand that a *natural* system to limit population growth, which is crucial for the continued well-being of the people and of the ecology in all its diversity, enjoys a much better chance of success than something imposed from the outside.

It will be interesting to see in twenty years' time which force has been the strongest: internal response or exterior pressure. I would be surprised, but very pleased, to see large camel herds coming down to water at the banks of the Uaso Nyiro with Samburu moran herding them. I shall probably see in their place *shambas* of scruffy maize. ♪

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