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The Gabbra Nomad survival kit

The sun rising over the desert in northern Kenya reveals a land full of dramatic extremes, with wind blasted volcanic wastes in the lowlands contrasted with lush tropical forests on the isolated mountains of Marsabit and Kulal.

1. The stiff turban and blue ritual beads mark this old man as a *dabola*, a ritual elder.

The Gabbra, who number about 35,000 people, cluster around the cracked, salt-encrusted mudflats of the Chalbi Desert and along the shores of the jade sea of Lake Turkana to the west where doum palm oases thrust from collected underground waters. The land changes constantly with the unpredictable seasons – long droughts interspersed with torrential downpours. Dusty, bleak landscapes transform almost overnight into fields of waving grass and wildflowers. The Gabbra move constantly to take advantage of the meagre, ephemeral offerings of nature where they occur.

The Gabbra are a Cushitic people, their language and culture being closer to those found in Ethiopia and the Near East than to those of Sub-Saharan Africa. They migrated into Kenya only in the last century, forced south by the Abyssinian Emperor Menelik II's marauding armies. The present day Kenya-Ethiopia border exists only as a line on a map for the Gabbra. They cross back

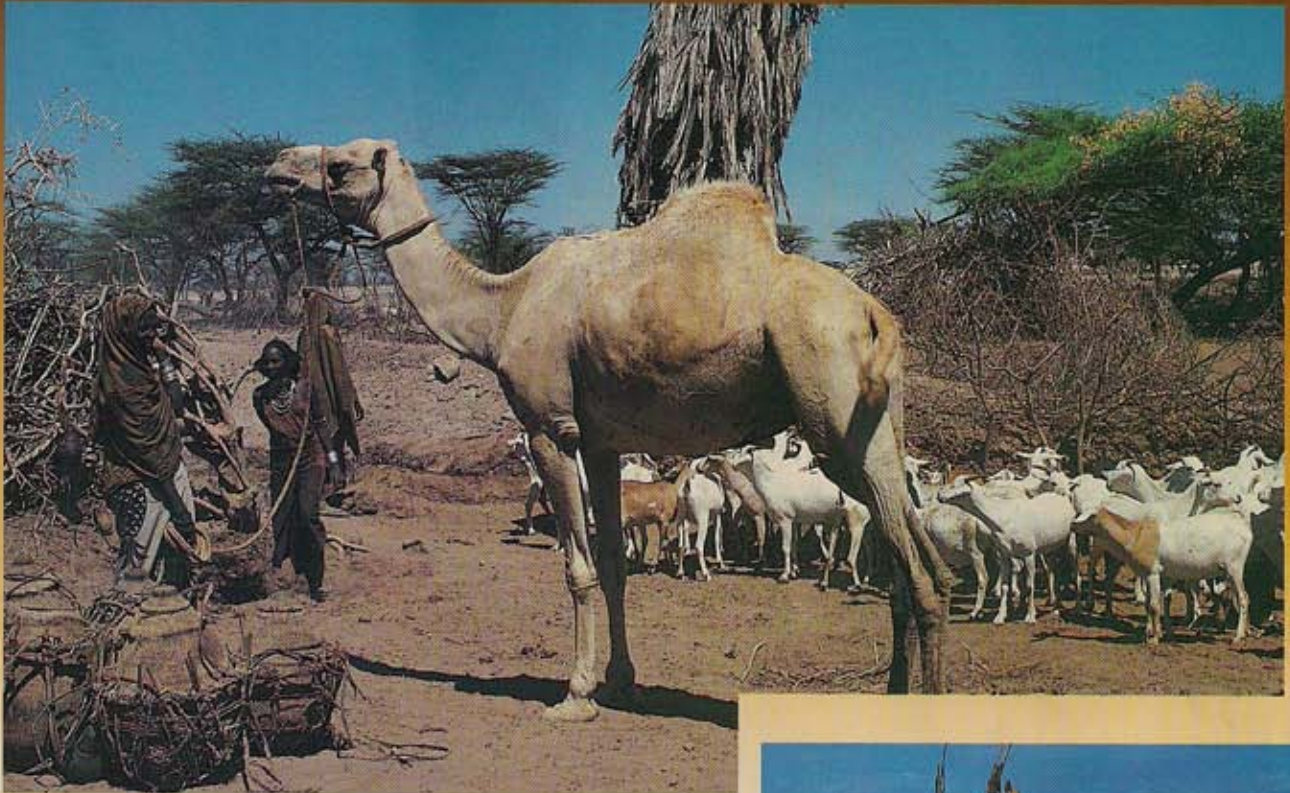


and forth freely, particularly since all of their sacred ritual places are in southern Ethiopia.

The unforgiving desert environment demands vigilant management of the land, labour and livestock. Without a complex system of strong social traditions to reinforce behaviour, Gabbra society would probably collapse under the stress of chronic droughts. The three keys to their success are mobility, hard work, and social cooperation. The elders control Gabbra life and provide order and moral guidance to ensure that the three keys are maintained. Married men take up various types of office during their lives, and they go through generation sets called 'political elders' and, later, 'ritual elders'. Without respect for the elders, Gabbra society would die and blow away like the dry season leaves.

The Gabbra must divide their herds of camels, cattle, sheep and goats by species, age, and whether they are giving milk or not, keep them on the move to find their right pasture, watering points and minerals. They know their vast territory as well as a European city-dweller knows his immediate neighbourhood. The European knows how to find the best milk, cheese and meat, and so too the Gabbra knows where to go to give his animals what they need to produce the same products. The main difference is that for the Gabbra, the stores are always changing locations in response to rainfall.

Milk is the traditional staple, followed by meat and then blood, but the Gabbra now commonly buy maize meal through the sale of small stock. They keep animals giving milk at the main settlements



2. This woman is preparing for a trip by loading milk in to a *chiccho* woven from wild asparagus roots.

3. An entire house, starting with the house poles, can be loaded on to the back of a camel, which allows the Gabbra to be true nomads.

(*ola*), and send the dry ones and most of the males off to distant locations in order to avoid overgrazing. Young warriors usually run the satellite camps, called *fora*, because other tribes often raid them. The zones of insecurity between enemy tribes are sparsely inhabited because of fear of attack. These attacks can be very bloody today because of the influx of automatic weapons caused by the troubles in nearby Somalia. Where in the past two or three might be killed, today the raids end up with forty or fifty dead. It is not uncommon to see American supplied helicopters of the Kenya army flying in pursuit of Ethiopian bandits heading for the border with their rustled Gabbra livestock.

The Gabbra can pack up a settlement, houses and all, on the backs of their camels and be on the move in five hours to an area where rain has fallen. The household effects are simple: woven grass and goatskin mats that make up the house coverings, aluminium cooking pots, wood and woven containers for milk, meat and fat storage, the bed poles and sleeping skins, and various types of ritual sticks. Household effects then set off on 'ships of the desert' across the stony plains to find their destination, which might be over one hundred kilometres walk away. A settlement may move like this up to ten times a year, depending on grazing and what neighbouring tribes might be doing.

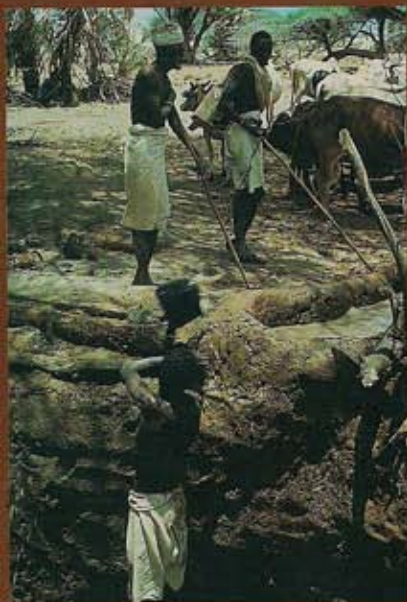
The camel is essential for Gabbra survival. Camels enable the Gabbra to move the *ola* on a moment's notice to find fresh pasture after a cloudburst. The camel is also used to transport life-giving water to the settlement, so that an *ola* can stay in an area of fresh pasture far from wells.



Food production is another important asset of the camel. The camel provides much more milk than cattle do in dry lands and, unlike cows, they continue to give milk throughout the dry season. For example, studies have shown that a good camel can give up to ten litres of milk a day during the rainy season and two to five litres during the dry. A camel also lactates on average for at least a year, providing food year round. In contrast, a typical cow only gives two litres of milk a day when pasture is lush, and it might produce a half litre a day during dry times. Lactation also averages only seven to nine months. Camel milk is also higher in vitamin C and other nutrients, due to the camel's more varied diet. These differences partially explain why cattle people need such huge herds to sustain them – the feed supply fluctuates greatly over time. The minimum number of animals needed to feed the group is geared to the worst conditions, necessitating large herds.



put on wrists to signify welcome and peace. Three *sorios* are held a year, and the Gabbra gather with their animals at a rare homecoming where family members and old friends can see each other after months of being apart. These get-togethers are used much like Christmas in the West to reinforce family ties and group solidarity. Water is critical for survival in the desert. The Gabbra cannot afford to fight over access to a few wells and waterholes. At the height of the dry season, hundreds of thirsty camels, cattle and small stock bellow for water and kick up clouds of dust around a well as their herders struggle to keep them at bay and await their allotted turn. The 'father of dividing', selected by the political elders, schedules each herd for watering. He must be a man of strict fairness and iron will. A chain of six or eight



An average family of six needs 64 cattle to feed it, while only 28 camels will sustain the same family. Another advantage of the camel, not recognised by experts until the 1980s – though common knowledge to people like the Gabbra – is that camels are more sparing of the environment than other livestock. With their soft feet they do not scuff up topsoil, causing it to blow or wash away, as hooved animals do; and they feed on all sorts of vegetation, particularly leaves, so that the land does not lose the soil-conserving grass. Traditional cattle people in northern Kenya,

men position themselves down the crudely dug fifty-foot well on hewn ledges, projecting rocks in the wall, or rickety scaffolding and pass the traditional giraffe-skin containers up and down in an endless chain.

They are called the 'singing wells' because the men keep up a rhythmic chant as they draw the water by hand. The animals drink from a trough of moulded mud, which needs constant repair from the damage caused by the jostling animals. One of the biggest problems the Gabbra face is fulfilling work needs. One study showed that they work more hours for more days in a year than any group ever recorded. Considering the wet and dry season regimes, which are different, it was calculated that looking after one family herd and the household chores required on average nine people working nine hours a day every day of the year. To find the necessary labour for this gruelling schedule, the Gabbra draw on a cat's cradle network of kinship and other social ties to look after their outlying camel, cattle and sheep-goat camps and the subdivided herds at the *ola*. The household is rare that has only mum, dad and the kids. For example, the father, mother and two small children might sleep in the small, domed house while two nephews and an unmarried brother-in-law sleep behind a thorn-branch windbreak out by the camel corral. A man belonging to the Wata, a low caste ethnic group, not allowed by tradition to sleep in the *ola*, could live to the west in the shade of an acacia tree. These additional household members each would have a different herd of the owners to look after, and would be paid in kind with food and stock offspring. Meanwhile, two of the owner's sons might be away at a *fora* camp near Lake Turkana, and the third in school in Marsabit about 100 kilometres away.

such as the Samburu and Pokot, are turning more and more to camels.

For people living in harsh climates, the camel also has one distinct advantage over the cow: it survives drought. Cattle will die after three days without water, the camel can survive for up to two weeks or more.

For all of these various reasons, camels are sacred animals. Cattle are valued, camels are worshipped, in numerous ceremonies and daily rituals.

The Gabbra have a fierce reputation, but the word *nagaya* – peace – is often on their lips, and they condemn fighting or strife amongst themselves. A ceremony called *sorio* is held three times a year to bless the community, the livestock, and to pray for peace, rain and fertility. Goats and sheep are sacrificed in front of each house, and skin bracelets are made from the sacrificed animals and

4. Males gather around to eat the meat of a sacrificed goat at a traditional blessing ritual.

5. Giraffe-skin buckets are used to fill watering troughs at wells.



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6. Everyone works in Gabbra country. This old lady is weaving a grass basket.

7. Only ritually pure males are allowed to milk the semi-sacred camel.

8. This woman is making a *bute*, the traditional water transport container. Unfortunately these are becoming relics of the past as plastic jerry cans replace them.

To discover how many animals people own, one must unravel all the complicated types of loans and categories of ownership that exist for livestock. One young married man, Dub Boru, explained how most of his animals came from his father, as an advance so to speak on his inheritance. He also had three camels and several sheep and goats that his *abuya*, a special uncle, had given him on various important occasions, such as at his circumcision. Because of the fluctuations in milk supply, these animals weren't always sufficient to feed the family, so Dub pooled his herd with that of his brother-in-law, who was in a similar situation. The combined herds provided a more reliable milk supply for both families.

Other animals came from exchanges; for example, when Dub's second child was born, he traded one of his transport camels for a cow in milk, and when he needed money for cloth for his

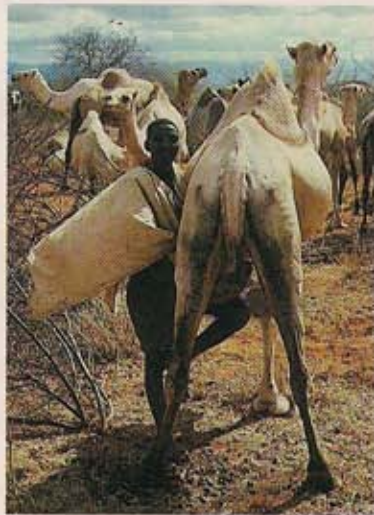
wife and school fees for a sister's son he traded a heifer camel for ten goats, which he then sold. Gabbra do not sell female camels directly for money, because they believe this would bring bad luck. He also managed several milk camels borrowed from friends and relatives. In exchange for diligently looking after the borrowed animals, he was entitled to the first generation of offspring, but had to give all later generation offspring to the lender. The Gabbra elders spend a lot of time keeping track of these complex affairs, much like tax specialists in the West.

But unlike in capitalist societies, the Gabbra rich cannot hoard their wealth. Surplus animals are redistributed to the needy, allowing the whole community to survive. The legal authority of political elders and the moral authority of ritual elders ensure that the mechanisms of social cooperation are respected. There is one old man named Guracha Galgallo, who is famous for owning about one thousand camels and innumerable cattle and small stock. Yet he dresses the same as all the other Gabbra, lives in the same style house, and eats the same food as the poorest Gabbra (though probably more regularly). Most of his animals are

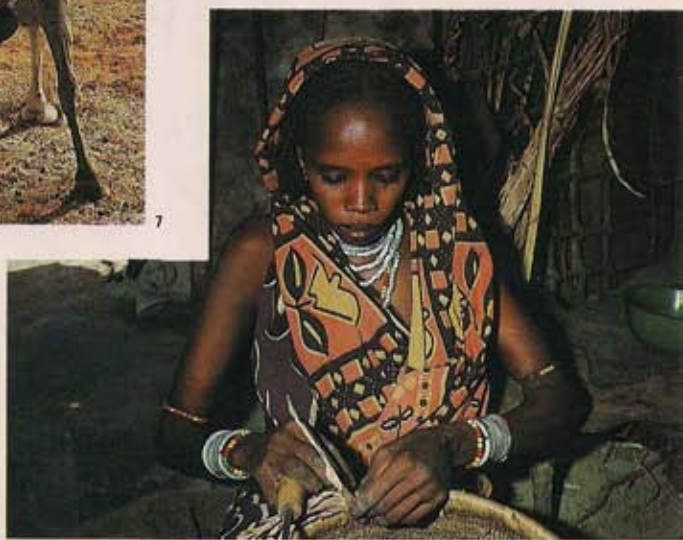
loaned out in some way to those who have need of milk, or transport, or a bull for mating. His reward is respect.

Unfortunately, recent drought and an undiagnosed camel disease have reduced the herds below the numbers needed for even basic survival, and food aid is now going to the Gabbra. They and other northern Kenya pastoralists have experienced similar hard times in the past and they have always managed to survive, but now things are different. Foreign relief agencies and other Westerners are there, greatly affecting Gabbra life. Because of the scarcity of livestock, and a frightening security situation due to the troubles in Somalia and Ethiopia, raiding has become much worse. Some Gabbra are moving to refugee camps only to escape armed bandits. If the political instability in the neighbouring countries can be put right, and if the rains return, things should improve for the Gabbra. But the pressures being put on their traditional culture could have much longer lasting effects.

The outsiders – the famine relief workers, the aid people, the missionaries, the teachers and government officers – are all telling the Gabbra that they are backward and primitive and that they have to change, to develop and progress. They call it 'joining the 20th century'. They are encouraging some to move to settlement schemes up on Mount Marsabit, to be taught how to grow crops. Most Gabbra are horrified by the thought of taking up cultivation. One man, a ritual elder named Elema Arbu, said that to do so was equivalent to becoming an outcast. Without livestock, how could he provide bride price for his sons, how could he pay the stock debts he owed, how could he perform *sorio* and other sacrifices necessary to appease God, and how could he give the stock gifts he was supposed to make at nephews' circumcisions. How could he hold his head up without herds?



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