



A verandah of the building pictured on this issue's cover. The National Museums plan to restore the facade this year.

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KENYA PAST and PRESENT

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Cover: Lamu Seafont Facade, by Ann Pulver

Moving House in the Desert

DANIEL STILES

Introduction

The Gabbra of northern Kenya are the most nomadic of all Kenya's pastoral peoples. This is because they live in the most inhospitable and environmentally marginal area of the country, the region between Lake Turkana and Marsabit Mountain. Their lives depend upon food and wealth derived from their livestock, and the lives of the animals depend upon the availability of water and vegetation. Since these are extremely variable in Gabbra country, a lot of time is spent moving from one site to another.

The Gabbra live in settlements called *ola*, which may have only two houses — or as many as twenty-five. An *ola* will move between four and ten times every year. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, for the Gabbra to do this without the aid of their most important domestic animal: the camel.

Entire houses and their contents are packed on the backs of camels to be transported sometimes as far as a hundred kilometres away over dry, rough, rocky ground to a new living area.

It is a marvellous experience to observe a *godan*, the Gabbra move, which begins in the early hours of morning, just after milking the animals and brewing tea. The men's duties are concerned mainly with the livestock. If the settlement has cattle, these are usually herded off first, since they need the most time for grazing along the way; they are followed by sheep and goats. The camels are the last to go because they can cover the ground the quickest.

The women have to pack the households. Their way of arranging possessions on the camels is an impressive engineering feat which has evolved over centuries of trial and error. In the photos that follow I hope to give the reader an idea of the work entailed for a *godan*.

A typical Gabbra house, called mana, will house from one to six people. Normally, a man and his wife and the younger children will sleep inside. The traditional house is made of skins, cloth, sisal mats and sometimes grass or palm leaves arranged over a framework of bent poles.



Daniel Stiles received his doctorate in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1981. He has been living in Kenya since 1977, lecturing first at the University of Nairobi, and now working in the Desertification Control section of UNEP. He has conducted archaeological research at Koobi Fora and Olduvai Gorge in East Africa, and in France (where he studied for a year and obtained the equivalent of an M.S. degree), Morocco, the Sudan, Botswana, South Africa, Malaysia and Pakistan. He has conducted ethnographic and human ecology research with many of Kenya's pastoral and hunter-gatherer peoples since 1978. His current interest is developing the use of the camel for increasing food production and reducing environmental degradation.





The house poles, made from strong but supple branches or saplings of *Cordia gharaf/sinensis* (madera) or *Grewia bicolor/trichocarpa* (aroessa), are tied together with ropes (haath algi) made from woven wild sisal fibers.



The skins (itile) and woven sisal mats (dasse) are first removed from the outside of the house, then the twines holding the house pole (utuba, dedee) joints together are untied; these are made of wild sisal (algi) or certain grasses.



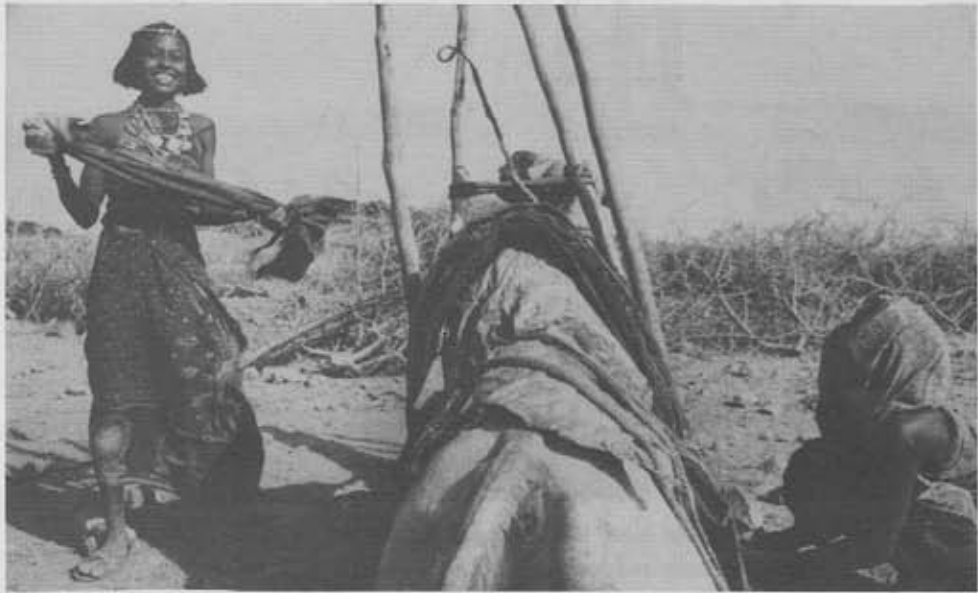
All the household items, such as stools (marjuma, kara) and ritual sticks (ejars), and containers for milk, curds, fat, posho, etc. are prepared after the house structure has been taken down.



Goat and sheep skin itile, padded by dasse, are first placed over the camel's hump and back, tied into place with haath algi or hide rope (haath guraj). Specially trained camels, called oro, are used for transport.



The large poles which form the bed frame (sirir) are used as the main frame for the camel load.



The head and foot cross poles are put in front, while the larger side poles of the bed go in the rear.



The frame and padded skins are secured snugly into place. This move will take two days and it is a measure of a woman's skill how well she packs the camel for the long and bumpy trip — and how well the household items survive the trip.

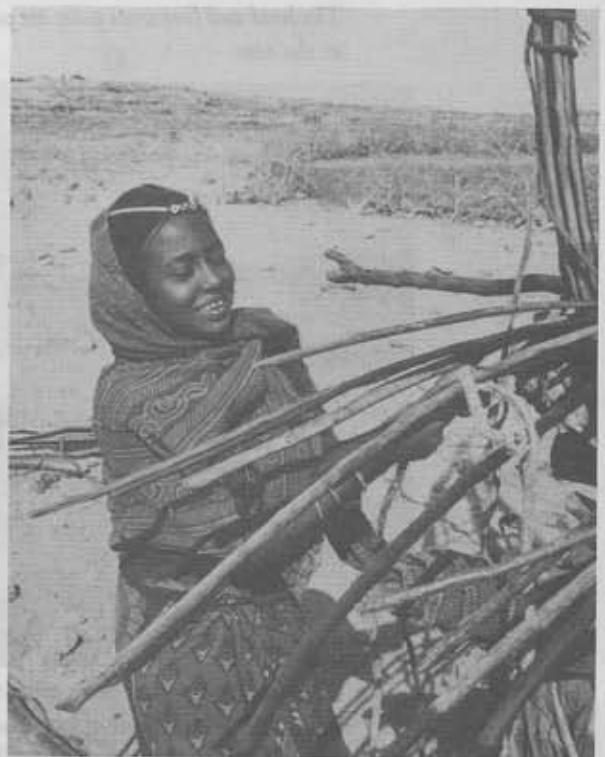


The houses are now all down; the house poles are tied into bundles; the dasse and itile are in rolls, and the camels are ready. Now, to put all of the bits, pieces and paraphernalia of a household onto the back of a groaning, slobbering camel.



The various rolled-up mats and skins are tucked along the sides, and house pole bundles are tied in prescribed ways both vertically and horizontally on the camel's back. These are held firmly in place by an intricate web of ropes.

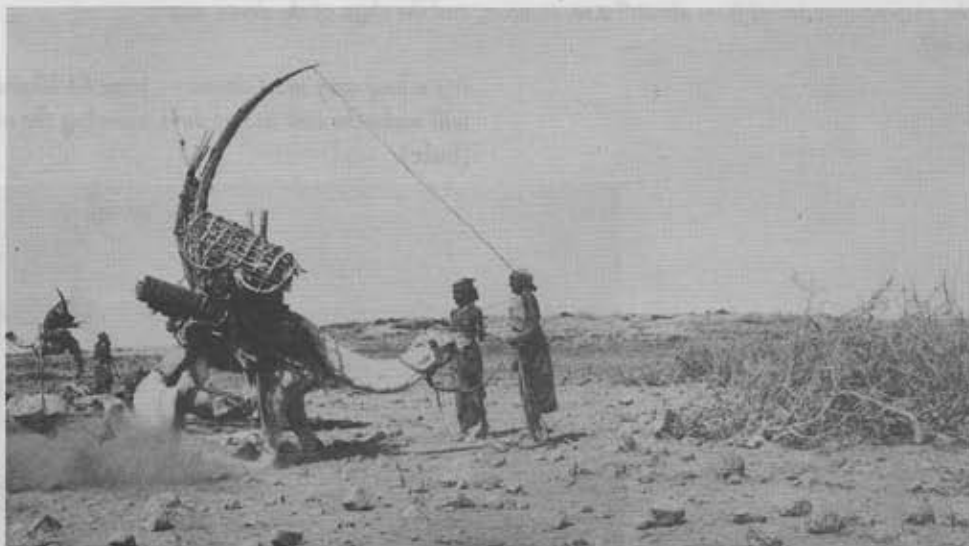
This girl, who is only 14, was recently married and this is her first godan where she is packing up her own household. Marriage is indicated among the Gabbra clans by the aluminium-banded malmal head-dress.



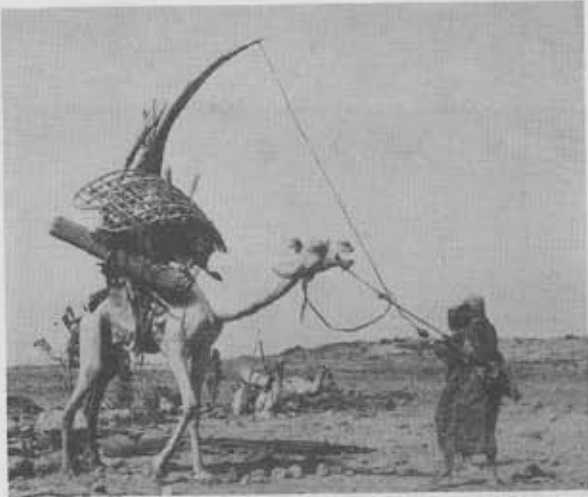
After the skins, mats, containers and furniture are properly stored on board, the bundle of the longest house poles is laboriously shifted into place.



This bundle of poles was cleverly tied together with a forked base, which allows the bundle to be braced on both sides of the camel's back for added stability. It is further braced by ropes tied to the bed frame poles.



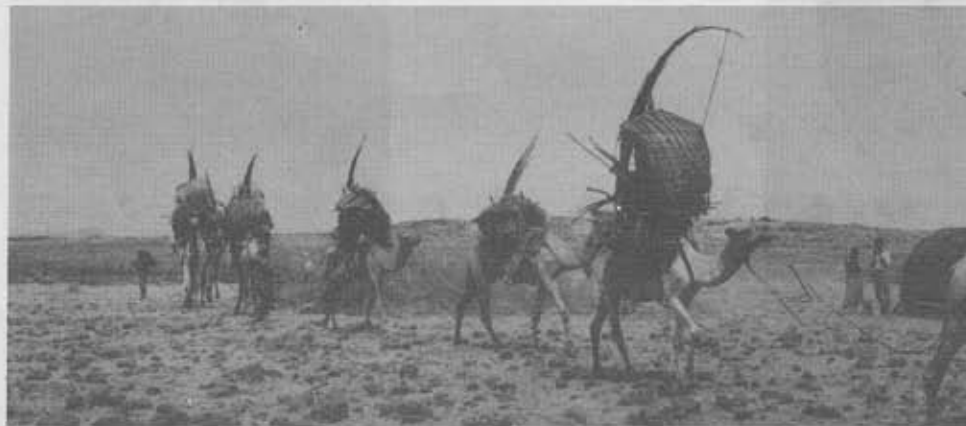
Now, to see if it all stays on when the camel lurches awkwardly to its feet



*It does!
The ladies have to hang on tight, and the camel bellows its displeasure.*



All that will remain of a Gabbra house when the last items are packed are a circle of stones and a stone hearth.



The preparations lasted from about 7 a.m. to noon, and the ships of the desert now set off.

It's a long way to Maikona — some 65 kilometres as the crow flies. These people will make the trek in two days, spending the night in the open on the lava plateau (bule).

