

JUBILEE AMONG THE GABBRA

It is the 49th year, the year of preparation for the 50th, the Jubilee. Wrongs are righted, sins forgiven, outstanding debts paid. Justice is being done. A myth from biblical times? No, it is a living tradition among the Gabbra of Northern Kenya. These livestock-herding people — camels, goats, cattle — occupy one of the most arid portions of East Africa. Theirs is an endless monitoring of the vagaries of fickle rain, honed by many years of practice into a calendar of 365 days, and into a cycle of years, typically in multiples of seven.

Bounded on the west by Lake Turkana, to the north by the Magado Escarpment just inside Ethiopia's southern boundary with Marsabit Mountain punctuating the southeast corner of the approximate quadrangle — is Gabbra country. Included in its topographical variety are the forbidding salt flats of the Chalbi Desert and on the other extreme the Huri Hills plateau, reserved by tradition for dry season grazing.

Marsabit Mountain is a desert miracle, a huge volcanic outcropping, capped with magnificent forest. An island of green surrounded by desert, with its own lush mini-climate. Of all the rains that come to northern Kenya, those which bless Marsabit Mountain are the most reliable. The air is cool at 5000 ft elevation and easily attracted the British colonial Government to the Mountain as a district administrative centre. It is where the Gabbra meet the

outside world; foreign tourists frequenting a forest lake lodge, government servants of independent Kenya and neighboring ethnic groups; the Rendille, the Samburu, the Borana, all of whom have roots in the pastoral, semi-nomadic tradition.

Gabbara life is hard not only because of scattered and uncertain rain. In 1878 cholera struck, decimating man and beast. A disease akin to polio further reduced the population in the following year. In 1880 the Gabbara together with their Boran neighbors fought a last major skirmish with the relatively distant Maasai; Gabbara won the battle but with heavy losses. At the turn of the century Gabbara livestock suffered an onslaught of rinderpest — a dreaded bovine disease which eventually ravished the continent, having started in Ethiopia and reaching, finally, Africa's southernmost cape. Soon after the rinderpest came a severe outbreak of malaria, a disease usually associated with heavy rains. Then came smallpox for the first time in 1891. There were further battles with neighboring groups in the early 1900's. Later there were bouts with chicken-pox and whooping cough. By 1914 an additional six livestock diseases — including bovine pleuropneumonia — had taken their toll.

The recent (mid-1970s) widely-publicized Sahelian drought also affected the Gabbara. It was severe, devastating, but in many ways, 'normal'. There had been a similar one in 1913, before the universal media could spread the word, and long before the United Nations agencies were in existence. For the Gabbara, life has been a continuous series

of difficulties. The ravages of nature have in their own cruel way ensured that the population of man and beast was kept at sustainable levels. Life continued, but selectively. It has been the survival of the fittest. Today the Gabbra are of spare, taut physique. Double chins, rotund girths are rarely seen among them. It is a question of survival, of maintaining the ability to cover vast distances at the bidding of climatic whims. Theirs is an affirmation of the human body as a miracle of adaptation, of coping with the most adverse conditions.

Gabbra Worldview

But Gabbra survival is facilitated not only by physiological or genetic dexterity. Like many traditional peoples, they have developed an elaborate understanding of the universe; they have their own cosmology. For them seven is a key number. Like in the western calendar, their week has seven days. Unlike the west they think of time and events as moving along cyclically while Westerners normally think of time and events as moving along in a straight line, linearly. Thus, for the Gabbra, years are easily clustered into groups of seven. The seven years of the cycle are named after the days of the week. “Monday” is the name of the year one in the cycle, “Tuesday” the name of year two, etc. After seven years, another "week" of years begins.

As in the Hebrew tradition (Leviticus 25), the Gabbra celebrate a “Jubilee”; after seven cycles of years have passed, it is time for a year of rest, of justice, of right relationships. Their Jubilee year coincided with 1981. 1980

was for them a year of preparation. Since most of their social and economic relationships are centered on livestock, it follows that preparation for the Jubilee involves the judicious exchange of livestock, concluding long standing but incomplete agreements, giving legal status to an earlier handshake deal. Generally it is a time of putting things in order. For the Jubilee can be celebrated only when all is forgiven, when relationships are right.

Why, one would reasonably ask, did such systems evolve? Some of the answers are fairly straightforward. One could speculate, for example, that a seven-year cluster is much easier dealt with in a predominantly oral society than is a cluster of 100 years: a century. In some nomadic groups, each seven-year cluster represents a separate age group. Puberty rites are held every seven years. And a new age group is launched; a new social rhythm begun.

Although they are not all consistent, weather cycles can more easily be observed in the context of a seven-year cluster. A single cycle will have its rains and droughts. But rarely will the weather patterns of a given cycle resemble precisely those of an earlier one. What is important for the Gabbra is that a seven-year period provides perspective. Droughts are resolved by rain, eventually, somewhere, within the accepted grazing territory.

One anthropologist describes this use of the seven-year cycle as a coping device, as a survival mechanism. It represents a careful use of collective memory. Events remembered by a collectivity provide the womb from

which are born the myths which nourish and sustain a people. In times of uncertainty and distress, such myths become a kind of living survival kit. Among the Gabbra there is also active use of cycles either longer or shorter than seven years. Aspects of ritual, social and even climatic events follow their several disparate rhythms. Whether longer or shorter, much of the Gabbra world of meaning is most easily described and understood in terms of cycles. Theirs is a survival made possible only by the clever use of cyclic patterns in the midst of unpredictable climatic elements.

It is not difficult, in this context, to understand the utility of the cyclic pattern. What is a bit less clear is why the theme of justice appears in the midst of these cycles. Where does the idea of the 50th year come from? Is it only a logical numerical sequence? Or was there some Hebrew theological fallout blowing across the lower reaches of the great desert? On the other hand, could one speculate that a year of justice, a year of peace appearing amidst the cycles of years is as natural as a leap year in the western calendar? Do nature's cycles bespeak renewal? Justice? Peace? Rest? Could one credit these systems to "natural revelation"? If so, how does one account for the rather elaborate theological understanding of God and universe among the Gabbra? Or is even that simply a more extensive insight on nature's carefully guarded secrets?

Impact of Modernization

The questions could be extended indefinitely. But perhaps it is more fruitful to reflect on what happens when the

Gabbara world meets the western world in the form of the missionary, the development worker, or the civil servant of the Republic of Kenya. The contrasts are profound. While the Gabbara are guided by a seven-year cycle, the "westerner", including the Kenyan civil servant, functions in the context of one-year cycles. Budgets, salaries, contracts, parliamentary debates and the rains are informed by the one-year cycle, by the fiscal year.

Rains in Kenya's 'down country' areas are more reliable than the rains of Gabbra-land. And of course the rains of North America's prairie belt and those of Western Europe boast an uncanny record of predictability. It is from those areas, the so-called rich "north", that development aid emanates. Indeed, the content of the modernizing process has to a large extent been honed and shaped in that context. A one-year cycle of four seasons in the "north" usually yields a harvest, profits/losses, balance sheets; resources/deficits from which the next year is planned, from which the next ventures are plotted, and from which the next development aid is allocated. Aspects of this process, notably the annual report, are readily transferred to the development process.

In Gabbra-land a three to four year stretch of drought is normal. Any modernizing presence from outside must take that into account. The development project in Gabbra-land may for three years running report only drought. And the project leader — typically on a two-year assignment — may well conclude that massive relief aid is required. The Gabbara, meanwhile, are informed by the perspective that

comes from the practiced monitoring of seven-year cycles. Of course they will accept relief aid in drought years. But relief of this kind breeds its own disaster. As dependency on easy food hand-outs grows, the age-old skills of coping with sustained drought are compromised. For the Gabbra, the twentieth century is definitely coming—in stilted form. Nineteen eighty one was a Jubilee year for the Gabbra. It was a form of justice or order chiselled into shape by a harsh, unrelenting environment. Whether the Gabbra will ever again in the future celebrate the Jubilee Year is a moot question. The fact that the tradition is still alive may bespeak their relative isolation. More positively it may reflect the wisdom of the wazee (elders) who understand that without the communal purge provided by the year of justice, there is no way to cope with their harsh homeland.

The odds are against the Gabbra way of life. The country's pastoral peoples are expected to participate fully in national life. It is government policy. It is a policy which does not easily accommodate the nomadic life style. Schools, as an example, are for people who stay in settled communities. Until now the country's agricultural policies have been better defined than have the policies related to rangeland or pastoral land improvement. The tendency, therefore, is to apply the agricultural policies across the board, touching range areas--like Gabbraland--in which agriculture is not viable and where a settled existence of any kind is possible only with careful rearrangement of available resources.

There is a kind of haste characterizing the modernizing process. Let us be honest. There is also competition between churches, between development agencies vying to lay hands on one of the last of Kenya's untouched territories. The ensuing change has little in common with the "timeless" plodding of the cycle of years. Modern development insists that drought is abnormal, an aberration. Drought now demands a response from the aid agency. It takes on the form of political pressure. "Do something, now!" If this government or that voluntary agency doesn't respond, then the other one will. Drought has been transformed from a normal climatic happening into a disaster.

Where is justice? If the Jubilee comes again for the Gabbra, it will be in emaciated form. There is no doubt that a sense of justice also informs the aid agency, the government settlement policy. It is often said, "The Gabbra must not be left behind. They must enjoy the fruits of independence". But one asks whether justice is kept in focus by the aid giver. To what extent is justice informed by the fragile environment? Can the largesse of service, the pace of the development, modernizing urge bespeak any form of Jubilee?

A modest beginning for the aid effort, if only to enlarge its own perspective, would include as a minimum a seven-year budget. It would include personnel committed to seven-year terms. Any definitive project reports could be expected only after an initial seven-year presence. Lesser perspectives, lesser aid cycles tend toward disasters. They

obscure any possibility of Jubilee surviving, even in a greatly altered form.

by

Harold Miller

National Council of Churches in Kenya

Rural Development Department

Nairobi, Kenya

1981