
5 **The System of Cattle Redistribution Among the Borana of Obbuu and Its Implications for Development Planning**

Summary 5.1 The System of Cattle Redistribution of the Borana. – 5.2 Social Context and Development Planning.

5.1 The System of Cattle Redistribution of the Borana

The main form of animal redistribution among the Borana Oromo is the allocation of cattle to a stockless man by members of his clan or lineage. Descent groups have no relationship to any specific territory and members of any clan and lineage live all over Boranaland.

According to Dahl, among the Borana of Isiolo District in Kenya, the case of any impoverished herder (*qollee*) is discussed at a meeting of clan elders, organised by a recognised clan leader, *jaallaba*. All the wealthy local herders of the clan are expected to participate in such a meeting. The wealthier ones will be requested to provide the *qollee* with a share from their own stock, sufficient to provide subsistence for his family (Dahl 1979, 173-4). As all the members of a local

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clan segment may suffer from the same environmental constraint, it is very likely that after a severe drought, there will be no cattle to distribute, so the system of redistribution fails.

The Borana of Obbbuu appear to follow a similar pattern to that described for the Isiolo Borana, but they differ in one important way. The predicament of any *qollee* will not simply be the concern of the local lineage, but also the concern of other Borana across the frontier with Ethiopia. Indeed, the Borana living in Obbbuu tend to operate at higher organisational levels than those of Isiolo. If the local assistance fails, or if the number of cows locally available does not respond to the *qollee's* needs, redistribution is extended to involve the members of his clan, even if they are spread all over Ethiopian Boranaland.¹ The only fixed rule is that there cannot be in Borana any descent section without a *hayyuu* to refer to.²

The problems of the *qollee* will be discussed at clan assemblies, *ko-ra gosaa*, which are organised and led by the leading *hayyuu* of each clan. All clan members are involved, though not all of them will be physically present. The conditions of all the local communities will be described by the local leaders of each clan, *jaallaba*, who will also coordinate the entire process according to their local competence.³

At such assemblies, the situation of each *qollee* is discussed as an independent and distinct case. Ideally, a *qollee* should get the total refund of his loss. In practice, the actual amount of cattle will be related to many factors, the more important being the way he lost his animals, the general economic situation of the country, his network of relationships, his reputation and the size of his clan. It is also possible that assistance will be denied. I recall a case of a man being refused clan assistance in 1951 because he had wasted the stock he had been given on two earlier occasions. He became a poor client/dependent.⁴ After all individual cases are discussed, the total number of cows which are needed for redistribution to the *qollee* as a whole will be decided upon. Each lineage of the clan will be requested to provide an equal amount of cattle. The lineage leaders will then select

¹ For simplicity of language, in this chapter by 'clan' I mean a descent group whose members recognise a common *hayyuu*. This does not always correspond to the groups that the Borana qualify as *gosa* and that are normally reported as 'clan' in the anthropological literature (see Haberland 1963, 123-6). In some cases two or three *gosa* may share the same *hayyuu*, in other cases *hayyuu* exercise their authority within the descent segments of a *gosa*, the lineages (*mana*). This asymmetry is probably the result of social, demographic and political change.

² Some descent groups have more than one *hayyuu*.

³ Some of the Borana clan systematically delegate local competence to officers known as *jaallaba abbaa qa'ee*. The zone of competence of each is not structurally fixed. A clan may have between three and twelve *jaallaba abbaa qa'ee* who are distributed over the whole of Obbbuu and Ethiopian Boranaland.

⁴ Hilarie Kelly reports a similar practice among the Orma Oromo in Kenya (1990).

the stock-owners, *abbaa karraa*, who should contribute, having regard to their wealth. Normally, no one homestead will be requested to provide more than one head, except when circumstances are desperate. The logistic collection and distribution of the animals are entrusted to selected *jaallaba*.⁵

The peculiarity of this system lies in the possibility of animal transfer between the Obbuu and the Boraana of Ethiopia. This is related to the differences between the ecological environments of the two areas. Obbuu is a lowland, mostly lying between 2,000 and 2,400 feet above sea level, with only a few sparse hills. Almost all of Boranaland in Ethiopia is at a higher elevation, lying between 4,000 and 5,000 feet. The two zones have markedly different rainfalls; droughts normally affect the lowest zone most severely.

In 1983 and 1984, drought devastated both areas. In 1986, during my field research in Uran location (Obbuu), I was told by the few *abbaa karraa* who still possessed viable herds that they had been able to save approximately half or one-third of their animals because they had migrated to Ethiopia, whereas those who had stayed behind had lost all, or nearly all, of their cattle. The general devastation prevented any stock redistribution from taking place. At the beginning of my field research, in February 1986, only a few clans had held a post-drought *kora gosaa*, which normally, I was told, should have been held each year. Some clans held their *kora gosaa* during my stay and the rest were about to do so. To the best of my knowledge, by the end of my sojourn in October 1986, no distribution of cows had been carried out, though some clan sections, for instance, the Karrayyuu Danqaa, had already collected their herd ready for redistribution; indeed, some people in Uran location were waiting to receive stock. Redistribution, therefore, in this case, required the movement of some cattle from the highlands of Ethiopia to the lowlands of Kenya.⁶ The situation in the highlands had not been as bad as that of the lowlands, although both areas had been seriously hit by the drought.

Mutual assistance across the different areas of Obbuu, and even across the international frontier, speeds up the herd reconstruction of each production unit. Stock redistribution also requires the migratory movement of stock with a consequent balanced exploitation of pastures. The development policy should, thus, involve both cattle re-distribution and migratory movement to better pastures.⁷

⁵ As the *kora gosaa* were held in Ethiopia and I was unable to cross the border, my present description of the organisation of a *kora gosaa* is mainly based on the information kindly provided by Bantee Abbagalaa, a *jaallaba abbaa qa'ee* of the clan Sirayyuu.

⁶ The opposite movement of cattle is likely to occur as well, owing to other types of environmental or political constraints.

⁷ Farming can be considered an alternative to pastoralism. It is already practised as an integrative economic strategy by the Borana of Obbuu. However, the ecological

Much attention should be dedicated to freedom of movement of people and stock across the international border. The border is always a potential danger to the system of mutual assistance and the normal flow of pastoralism, because governments may decide to limit freedom of movement for political reasons or the sake of trade taxation. Such measures, if they are effectively applied, are extremely harmful because they also stop the seasonal migrations of the *foora* herds by both Ethiopian and Kenyan Borana from the highlands to the lowlands and vice-versa.⁸

5.2 Social Context and Development Planning

There is no doubt that the system of traditional cattle redistribution has been, and is still today, an important institution for all the Borana, as well as for the other pastoral peoples in the area. Its value, therefore, needs to be considered in its cultural context, with attention to the following items:

- The system of cattle property. Individually 'owned' cattle cannot be considered absolute private property. The mutual obligation which binds members of the same clan demonstrates the collective aspect of cattle property. A clan is conceived as a corporate whole, at least regarding the herds owned by its members. It is because of this collective element that a clan assembly is legitimated to discuss and dispose of individually owned animals.
- Rituals express social values. For instance, when the need is felt, the clan organise the *Manidda* ceremony. The Siraayyuu clan held their last *Manidda* in the 1980s in *Liiban* and the Karrayyuu Danqaa in 1983 at Dakale Gimbe, which is also in Ethiopia but not far from Obbuu.⁹ Each participating homestead is expected to bring its cattle; this discourages large or frequent recurrence of the ceremony and participation by those who live far away. The senior elders of the clan should anyway always be present. During the ceremony, a single large cattle enclosure is built, in which stock from different herds are mixed. This symbolically strengthens the idea of cattle being a clan rather than an individual asset.

environment is not so suitable for agriculture, especially because of low rainfall with the associated high risk of crop failure.

⁸ *Looni foora* are herds of mainly dry cattle that are permanently kept out of the village, even in very far places, to maximise the efficient exploitation of graze. They are a normal feature of mobile pastoralism, an adaptation to the environment and its spatial and time variation.

⁹ Information by Bantee Abbagalaa.

- The system of values. Cattle redistribution is tied to Borana's ethics. Every male Borana is recognised to have a full right to become a self-sufficient member of his society. His clan should enable that right to be achieved. The ideology behind cattle redistribution is fundamental and widespread in pastoral societies. Indeed, if only the mere need for food were at issue, the problem could be solved by simply having the poor work for the wealthy for wages or food, or by types of stock loan.
- Social organisation. Cattle redistribution is set within the context of a traditional social organisation. Its practical implementation is related to each clan and its leaders. Clan leaders derive their legitimacy from their position within the two major Borana institutions: the *gadaa* system and the *qaalluu*. These institutions are also an integral part of the ritual system (Baxter 1965 and 1978).
- The jural system. Mutual assistance is, of course, regulated by customary laws and norms, and its observance is assured by the authority of institutional customary leaders.

Cultural change may affect these social factors and their inter-relation may be seriously compromised, affecting also the efficiency of the system of mutual assistance. According to the complaints of most of the elders, mutual assistance no longer works as effectively as it did in the old times. The elders stated that interpersonal solidarity is not as strong as it used to be. The adoption of new religions, the penetration of different values, the imposition of the state with the marginalisation of customary practices and involvement in the market economy must be reckoned among the main factors which have had a negative influence on the system of cattle redistribution.

Development projects are themselves factors of cultural change. Their planning should, therefore, be conceived in such a way as not to cause indirect effects which could compromise the efficiency of such long-tested systems and institutions as the cattle redistribution of the Borana. The achievement of a positive result requires an objective knowledge of the old systems which, if properly understood and applied, might become an inspiration and a stimulus for constructive innovations.

