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OF A NEW BURJI
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LIVESTOCK TRADE IN
NORTHERN KENYA

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Breaking Barriers: the construction of a new Burji identity through livestock trade in northern Kenya¹

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Abstract

This paper examines how the British-Burji encounter at the beginning of the first half of the 20th century in a remote borderland area in northern Kenya shaped the social and economic structures of the Burji community extending into the post-colonial era. The expansion of the colonial administration in Kenya had tremendous impact on the social, economic, and political fabric of the communities encountered. Instances of collaboration and sometimes fierce resistance from local residents were not uncommon. A wide range of factors are at the core of the emergence of a new Burji identity in northern Kenya in the past couple of decades. Historically, the Burji community in both southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya had unpleasant interactions with state structures and institutions and continues to endure adverse policies aimed at alienating it. These interactions are perceived as an extension of the colonial legacy. Using historical and extended fieldwork data collected in 2001–02 and in 2006–07, the paper argues that the emergent new identity through dominance in livestock trading and mercantile activity and the community's determination to occupy an economically-powerful position in a politically-volatile environment are products of the historical and contemporary marginalisation policies that the colonial administration and post-colonial state and institutions, respectively, upheld against the Burji community in northern Kenya.

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Introduction

The impact of the expansion of colonial administration in Kenya was as varied as the communities that the colonialists encountered. Instances of collaboration and sometimes fierce resistance from local residents were not uncommon. In the former case, collaboration with the colonial state presented benefits to certain groups. For instance, it provided the Il Chamus people of Baringo District, Kenya, with security, land, and livestock confiscated from ethnic groups that resisted the colonial intrusion (see Little 1998). Because the overarching objective of the establishment of the British colonial rule in northern Kenya was to halt the southward Ethiopian expansion (e.g. Hogg 1986), it hardly led to large-scale confrontation between the colonial administrators and the local population. In fact, the advent of colonialism prompted mass movement of people from diverse ethnic groups at different times from southern Ethiopia into northern Kenya fleeing oppression, slavery (Brown n.d.), and the Italo-Ethiopian war, which broke out in 1935 (Wilkin 1980). The Burji were one such group that fled oppression in their homeland in southern Ethiopia to seek refuge in northern Kenya. Overcrowding and constrained economic opportunities in southern Ethiopia as opposed to emerging prosperity in the British northern Kenya could also have prompted the Burji migration into northern Kenya.

On the other hand, incidences of brutality, extortion of labour, and forceful evictions were frequent. For example, the British expansion in western Kenya was achieved by means of brutality against those who resisted the colonial rule, such as the Bukusu and the Gusii (Lonsdale 1977). Berman and Lonsdale (1992) document a chronology of “British-enemy” confrontations, which led to massive deaths on the British and enemy sides and livestock confiscations running into the thousands between November 1893 and December 1911. Another devastating impact of colonial policies was its anti-hunting strategy aimed at profit generation for the colonial and post-colonial states, which “(...) contributed to the demise of the way of life of a number of hunting groups.” (Kassam and Bashuna 2004: 194) Kassam and Bashuna further argue that the conservation policy and consequent loss of livelihood did not only bear economic and political consequences for the Waata people of northern Kenya, but also had negative impacts on the relationships with neighbouring pastoral groups (2004). Generally, the response to colonial rule in other parts of the colony was military confrontation, for example, among the Nandi and the Kikuyu and many other Kenyan ethnic groups that opposed the British rule. One of the impacts of the colonial rule in northern Kenya was the categorisation of the residents based on their history and worth to the colonial economy. Prejudiced policies were not resisted overtly and the distressed minority groups, such as the Burji, had few options to challenge the status quo. It was not until the continuation of the marginalisation process into the post-colonial era that the Burji community silently resisted the dominance, not through political resistance but covert economic strategies including control of the livestock marketing system.

This paper examines the Burji migration to northern Kenya, and how they became the target of colonial prejudiced policies against immigrants and minorities. Using historical and contemporary data, the paper explores the processes of the British-Burji encounter and its outcomes, such as confinement in a poorly-serviced and isolated neighbourhood in Moyale town, exclusion from certain positive effects of the occupation other than the provision of menial labour to the colony, discouragement from interacting with other ethnic groups in the town, and prohibition from owning businesses or residential plots in the town centre. The paper traces how the Burji continued to

experience exclusion during the post-colonial era and their strategies to construct a new identity built around dominance in livestock trading.

Günther Schlee states that ethnicisation of politics and intensification of violence with the rapid spread of automatic weaponry in northern Kenya has led to increased salience of ethnic identities and a re-shuffling of ethnic alliances and warns that claiming “(...) the wrong affiliation or to be found to have the wrong affiliation in the wrong place can be deadly” (2007: 418). This explains why perennial enemies, such as the Boran and the Degodia or the Ajuran and the Boran could find a strong need for re-affiliation after “discovering” some common past. At a time when ethnic groups and clans in the risk-prone arid northern Kenya are seeking to re-affiliate through such discoveries of past relationships, the Burji history and past is considerably dissimilar to the experiences and relationships of pastoral communities in the region. I argue that the emergence of a new Burji identity constructed around livestock trade must be examined against the backdrop of colonial and post-colonial direct and indirect policies of exclusion and social and economic categorisation.

According to William Roseberry, “(...) social relations that characterize one period or one type of relationship continue to carry social, economic, and political weight in a subsequent period” (1989: 116). For the Burji, the experiences of the post-colonial period and their current relationships with the state and development agents do not appear to have undergone a significant shift from the interactions of the colonial period and the community’s relationship with the British. The old and new periods seem to possess more or less similar characteristics – production of classes and categorised citizens. The continuation of the categorisation of citizens explains the persistent classification of the Burji as sub-ordinate members of the community. The historical approach in the examination of Burji relations with the colonial state and post-colonial institutions over time is due to “(...) the fresh perspective it provides on the local actors themselves” (Roseberry 1989: 117). Although studies on ethnic trading in livestock in Sub-Saharan Africa have stressed the dominance of certain ethnic groups and clans in the trade, the history and the questions of why and, to some extent, how these hegemonic tendencies are produced and sustained have received inadequate attention. To address these critical issues, the paper traces the history of the migration and relationships of the Burji community of northern Kenya with the British colonial administration and recent relations with development agencies. These relationships have not always been in favour of the Burji.

The examination of the historiography of the Burji in northern Kenya is vital to understanding the group’s significant role in livestock trade and the construction of a new identity around it. First, as mentioned earlier, the Burji are an immigrant and minority group, who have been subjected to discrimination concerning access to jobs and other economic opportunities, land ownership, and being segregated in a distinct residential quarter in Moyale town. Second, the Burji are a talented farming community in southern Ethiopia and were also successful farmers in northern Kenya. For example, the Burji and Konso communities exported crops out of Moyale to neighbouring districts in the 1920s (see Wickham 1927). Upon Kenya’s independence and the departure of colonial administrators from northern Kenya, farming became a risky business as conflicts intensified over grazing land between rival pastoral groups. Thus, the Burji were largely excluded from the redistribution of farming land around Moyale town. Although the Burji have continued to produce crops on Mount Marsabit with great success, the community has often had to grapple with intense competition from pastoral groups for whom the mountain resources provide vital dry-season

grazing and opposition from politicians who perceive the Burji as aliens earning a living through pastoral land and livestock.

The case of the Burji is one of a non-indigenous non-pastoral group dominating trade in a valuable pastoral commodity in the heartland of a pastoral territory. The Burji adaptations to these adverse policies involve a range of strategies. The overarching objective is to create dominance around an important economic niche – the livestock marketing sector. First, they control the operations of the Moyale livestock market and the trading processes, such as the purchasing of livestock and payment systems including the venue and timing. Second, the Burji dominate the ownership and operation of trucks used for livestock transportation from Moyale to Nairobi. Third, Burji traders have a vibrant traders' association, which adopts salient but effective approaches to impose entry restrictions to livestock traders from other ethnic groups. These may seem bold approaches but are deemed necessary given the nature of the trade, circumstances of trading, and the political and physical environment in which livestock trading and transportation are undertaken.

While I argue that the Burji had to dominate the economic niche involving livestock marketing to survive in the politically, economically, and ecologically-harsh northern Kenyan environment, Schlee (1994) states that the Boran notion of the principle of an ecological niche is that a peaceful coexistence comes about among groups who do not compete for the same resources. In other words, creation of domination in exploiting an ecological niche can only bring tension and conflict between groups. In this respect, the Boran and the Rendille maintained separate ecological niches to remain exclusive. The Burji have created and maintained a tight grip on their economic niche in northern Kenya whereas the Boran appear to be losing control over their niche to the camel-herding Gabra and Somali groups. This is partly explained by Schlee's (1994) assertion that the Boran adopted the practice of incorporating their neighbouring camel-keeping groups while remaining themselves reluctant to expand into the territories of these allies. While the economic niche discussed in this paper relates to livestock marketing the ecological niche that Schlee (1994) discusses in his work on "identities on the move" relates to livestock production.

Origin, Immigration, the British-Burji Encounter, and Marginalisation

A few anthropological studies³ have been done among the Burji in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya (for example, Kellner (2006) on Burji culture and history; Mahmoud (2003) on Burji livestock trading networks in northern Kenya and their trading links with southern Ethiopian pastoralists and livestock traders; and Wedekind (1980) on Burji and other languages in southern Ethiopia). When Kenyan Burji are asked where they came from, they would generally point to *Gaar Burji* (the Burji Mountains) in southern Ethiopia and principally Soyama and Hagere Mariam towns. Kellner (2006) also points to the southern slopes of the Amarro Mountains as the Burji homeland. In northern Kenya, the community mainly lives in Moyale and Marsabit towns and smaller numbers live and work in Nairobi and other towns around the country. According to Kellner (2006), the Burji regard the Liban area near the present day Negelle in southern Ethiopia as their place of origin and the source of their culture. He further argues that the Burji lived together with the Boran and Konso and the three groups were connected in close kin relations in *mashaana* (sharing the same father, but different mothers) and in *fira* (being relatives) (Kellner 2006: 129). The Burji departure from the Liban region was triggered by disagreements over the defiling of a

³ Kellner (2006) states that Helmut Straube was the first to conduct an anthropological study among the Burji in 1955.

sacrificial animal, which the Burji said they were accused of falsely having nothing to do with the act. It was in the process of this migration that “(...) the Burji developed their own way of life and their own socio-cultural institutions” (Kellner 2006: 130). The implications of these earlier relations in the “Liban Tradition” between the Boran and the Burji and their later parting of ways could be a factor in the on-going processes of exclusion in northern Kenya, although Kellner (2006) asserts that the reference to this tradition is sometimes used to quell conflicts between the Boran and Burji on Mt. Marsabit.

Northern Ethiopia’s economic and political involvement in the southern region has been asserted as exploitative (Donham and James 1986, Henze 2000, Jalata 1993). In addition to annexing and “Abyssinizing” the southern region, the Emperor’s administrators drained various sorts of goods out of the periphery to develop and protect the core (see Jalata 1993). Jalata further states that from 1888 to 1914 alone colossal amounts of commodities, including coffee, hides and skins, ivory, cattle, and slaves were drawn off from southern Ethiopia by Arab, Indian, and European traders through the Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somali ports, which potentially made Ethiopia’s southern regions the source of Ethiopia’s exports to the outside world (1993). The Burji were particularly subjected to *gabbar* (compulsory labour) and different forms of enslavement. The Burji support for Italian troops in the 1936 invasion of the region against the Ethiopian army is a clear expression of the hatred the Burji had for their Ethiopian masters. Although Emperor Haile Sellasie abolished slavery in Ethiopia in 1941, the Burji continued to be subject to discrimination through excessive taxes (Kellner 2006). While Kellner argues that it was this ill-treatment that compelled the Burji to migrate to Kenya in the 1960s, the Burji migration appears to have commenced earlier.

The British colonial administration in northern Kenya perceived the Burji migration into the area as an escape from slavery in southern Ethiopia, thus one of the British District Commissioners in Moyale, R. Tatton Brown, stated that “(...) the British attitude to slavery was well known and slaves used to make their way from Ethiopia to seek the protection of the British flag. They were not unwelcome as they provided a more stable labour force than could be provided by the local nomads” (Brown n.d.: 3). Exemption from paying rents on plots and a general show of sympathy was one of the features of the newly founded British-Burji relationship in Moyale as Mr. D.H. Wickham, the colonial District Commissioner for Moyale stated, “[t]hey are the most valuable part of the population of the district, and are mostly very poor.” The Burji and Konso were thus exempted from paying plot rents because of their abject poverty and a deplorable social and economic status (Wickham 1927: 7).

Although praising the role of the Burji and the Konso in the colonial economic system and being sympathetic to them for their unfortunate social and economic positions, British administrators indeed became the architects of the marginalisation process, which adversely affected the Burji and several minority groups in the former Northern Frontier District (NFD). They used a policy of segregation and discriminated against certain immigrant groups, including the Burji and Konso. Ironically, discriminatory and disgraceful policies were being enforced at a time when the affected groups provided the desperately needed labour force for the economic development of the northern townships. The Burji and Konso lived in Bulla Maskini (the village of the poor) in an eastern suburb of Moyale. The quarter is now referred to as Manyatta Burji (the village of the Burji). Gerald Reece instructed a colleague and an incoming District Commissioner for Moyale, A.C.M. Mullins, that:

“[s]ince Moyale and Mandera are frontier towns, they are very liable to be overrun with refugees and undesirable characters. I have hitherto gone on the policy of only allowing as residents in the town bona fide traders and their employees, and people such as old soldiers who are deserving of consideration. At Moyale there is a separate village for the Burji and Konso, who should not be allowed to squat in the township. Similarly at Mandera there is a village for the Gurre Murre and Gabbawein separated from the town.” (Reece 1931: 77)

He further emphasised that squatting in the townships “(...) usually does no good to the community and only makes the town more overcrowded, dirty, and unhealthy for the decent citizens and traders” (Reece 1931: 78). The high esteem that the colonial government upheld for certain social categories in the colony, such as “traders and old soldiers”, partly explains the Burji endeavour toward the control of and excellence in livestock and mercantile trade – an objective that the group achieved about six decades later.

Another feature of the colonial biases was obvious in civil servants’ remuneration packages and other benefits. For example, the Burji Headmen, Guyo Mare and Sodi Soki, were each paid Sh5⁴ per month while the Adjuran’s Ido Robleh earned Sh60, the Sakuye’s Kuno Dida Sh30, the highest paid Boran Headman, Jaldessa Jarso, earned Sh20, and the Gabra’s Diid Kanjo Sh10 monthly (see Davenport 1929). The highest ranking Burji in government service was ex-Sergeant Major Darro Geldo, who was the only Burji allowed to own plot number 36 in the town and only during his life time. The stipulation on the ownership of the plot was that after his death the plot would revert to the colonial government. The policy in land allocation to the Burji further stipulated that no Burji was allowed to own a plot in the township and no new allocations of plots would be made in the Manyatta Burji without the consent of the Provincial Commissioner (Waller 1952). Other Burji government employees ranked as office boys who included Oshe Mude and his assistant Mude Gale. Another Burji, Shanqo, preceded Oshe as office boy, but was dismissed upon joining the Somali Youth League (personal communication with Hajji Shanqo, Moyale, July 24, 2007; see also Christie-Miller 1949).

While the British were aware and encouraged the immigration and settlement of the Burji in northern Kenya, they did not play a part or lay the foundations for the community’s ascendance from economic and social marginalisation to successful entrepreneurship. The main difference between Bulla Maskini as it was known in the 1920s and the current Manyatta Burji is the level of transformation the quarter has undergone. It has sprung from poverty to prosperity thanks to the thriving cross-border livestock and commodity trade. The village, however, remains the main Burji suburb in Moyale District. The Burji category as ex-slaves whose labour was indispensable in the town for works ranging from construction jobs to domestic chores persisted until the 1990s when a cross-border livestock trade boom created a new economic niche and thereby a new identity for the community. The process of discrimination of certain groups due to their history as immigrants, dominated groups, and minorities in the allocation of government jobs and plots while recognising others as constituting the favoured citizenry was one of the major glitches of the British colonial rule in the former NFD, yet, the region has historically been home to immigrant groups.

⁴ Sh. is an acronym for Shillings, which was the name of the currency used in the colony and became KSh (Kenya Shillings) in post-independence Kenya. The June 2009 exchange rate is 1US\$ = KSh78.

Contemporary Policies of Partiality

The policy of partiality against the Burji, which began during the colonial rule as stated earlier, did not abate upon independence and subsequent post-colonial state formation. The new nation state bolstered its position through ethnic manipulation, in which only dominant ethnic groups benefited from the so-called ‘national cake’ in the form of state jobs, allocation of prime state lands, and election and selection to political positions. The Burji encounter with post-colonial discrimination occurs at two levels: 1) at the individual and 2) at the collective levels. In the case of the former, individual Burji businessmen and women, professionals, and the general members of the community experience tensions between them and the members of the politically and demographically dominant ethnic groups, on the one hand, and between them and development agents, on the other. For example, when registering a birth or filling out an application for a national identity card or a passport, an ordinary Burji would have to do more than the usual explanation compared to the members of ethnic groups that are regarded indigenous. However, it is important to note that Kenyan border communities face this predicament in general, but the problem of registration is acute among communities in northern and north-eastern Kenya generally.

In another example, one of the very few Burji women university graduates and a trained teacher expresses her frustrations after opting to teach in a secondary school in Moyale. According to her explanation, taking up a teaching position in Moyale would not only keep her close to her parents, relatives, and what the community calls ‘home’ but would also enable her to contribute to girls’ secondary education in northern Kenya, which has been a disaster because of social and political reasons. Having spent several years at the school, the female teacher had to relocate out of Moyale District because of what she says was a blatant discrimination against her because of her ethnicity and history. Another woman teacher, with whom she graduated from the same university at the same time with equal qualifications, but belonging to the dominant Boran group with the right political connections, was duly promoted to head the school and remained in that position for several years. For the Burji teacher explaining the existing unequal opportunity at the school, it is a situation of being in the wrong place with the right qualifications. She has since accepted a position as head teacher in a private school in the more comfortable central Kenya.

At the collective level, the rapport between Burji organisations and development agencies in the district are problematic. In an effort to diversify the incomes of the livestock-based economy and contribute to local community development through investments in education, the Moyale Livestock Traders’ Association⁵ purchased a piece of land in Moyale and sought the help of the multi-million World Bank-funded and Government of Kenya-implemented Arid Lands Resource Management Project (ALRMP) to assist them with the set up of a primary school. According to the traders’ association officials, they approached the ALRMP management in Moyale for assistance, but their request was turned down without a convincing explanation as to why the education project was deemed unfeasible. However, the association went ahead to implement the project with the association’s funds. The school project has been completed and admits students from the town as well as from across the border in Ethiopia and it is the first school in the entire northern Kenya with a school bus that provides transportation to and from school for its students, teachers, and staff.

⁵ The Moyale Livestock Traders’ Association is a livestock marketing group that the Burji use to facilitate livestock marketing and protect their position in the trade. See Mahmoud (2003, 2008) for detailed descriptions of the history and activities of the association.

The general sentiment among Burji traders about the difficulties in the relationships between them and development agencies is a product of selective policies to undermine the community in general and livestock traders in particular – a situation that does not augur good for the interest of pastoral producers and the larger livestock-based economy of northern Kenya. Livestock traders deem themselves a crucial part in the development and improvement of the livelihoods of the people of the area. The traders' association and the larger Burji community believe that they need to be integrated in the larger political and economic framework of the area and treated equally with the rest for assistance in development projects that promise to benefit all communities. In the case of the school project, the Burji community perceives this act as a manifestation of prejudice connected to the colonial legacy of discrimination and marginalisation in the area.

Other Burji community development project requests were made to the leading local non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Community Initiative Facilitation Assistance (CIFA), which also declined to extend assistance to the group. Indeed, according to one of the senior officials of the Livestock Traders' Association, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of CIFA told them that they (the traders' association and the Burji generally) ought to donate to others not to ask for donations, apparently in reference to the group's superior managerial capacity in livestock trade and strong financial position. In retaliation, the Burji community voted as a block against the CEO of CIFA when he contested the Moyale parliamentary seat in the 2007 general elections. The official of the group told me "we taught him a lesson at the ballot when he came asking for Burji votes," (personal communication, Moyale Livestock Traders' Association, official, March 2008). This is a significant political statement that the Burji community has assertively made through a newly acquired identity, group cohesion, and confidence based on their recent economic successes through livestock trading.

Seeking a New Burji Identity – becoming a community of entrepreneurs

There is no doubt that northern Kenya is a permanent home for the Burji community whose business enterprises contribute immensely to the livelihoods of a varied group of northern Kenyan residents, including the dominant pastoral populations. The community has undertaken enormous investments in the area despite numerous risks that accompany living and trading in Kenya's northern volatile borderlands. Livestock trading is a major business undertaking, which the Burji dominate in northern Kenya. The Burji control the livestock trading chain from purchasing in northern Kenya to trucking and selling in Nairobi. Investments in trust and social networks help Burji livestock traders circumvent trading, transportation, and debt risks (see Mahmoud 2003, 2008). Exclusionary strategies that the Burji practice in livestock trading in northern Kenya are a response to the earlier mentioned historical marginalisation and contemporary prejudiced policies. In addition, the use of exclusive livestock trader associations to cater for the welfare of traders and to buffer against trading shocks is a methodically protectionist behaviour.

Trader Transition: migrant – livestock trader – merchant

Burji livestock traders in northern Kenya transit through a number of stages in their business lives. Although the journey through these stages is not universal for all traders or Burji business people, this is to demonstrate a more general path to becoming a livestock trader and on to becoming a merchant among the Burji immigrants and those who were born in northern Kenya. The Burji

movement to northern Kenya is a continuous process, which has been undertaken in different forms and can be categorised in three distinct phases. First, there is the more salient and dynamic form of migration during the colonial period that was discussed earlier in this paper. Second, subsequent waves of Burji immigrants arrived in northern Kenya to unite with friends and relatives.

And the third and most significant is the on-going Burji migration into northern Kenya in search of economic opportunities. In general, the current Burji migration to northern Kenya and beyond is of economic and societal nature rather than being a response to the volatile political environment in Ethiopia, which is a leading factor in the renewed human exodus from Ethiopia to Kenya since the 1970s. While a part of Burji migrants have relatives in Moyale or Marsabit, Kenya, some do not possess initial contacts in the region. Migrants whose relatives have established businesses in the area are quickly introduced to various trading opportunities, including livestock and merchandise trading. Other migrants take up general labour and domestic jobs in towns to make ends meet. The stories of most prosperous Burji businessmen and women in Moyale and Marsabit begin with humble origins, but are a blend of creativity, hard work, and persistence. The new life in the new setting usually starts off as menial labourers, donkey-cart water vendors, and domestic servants. Through kin connections and support, some venture into small businesses such as selling second hand clothes and running small grocery kiosks. Some of them have become wealthy in the town as millionaire wholesalers, livestock traders, and transporters. These windows of economic opportunity not only galvanise group identity and solidarity, but also stimulate further migration to bolster the group's newly attained position.

Prior to the cross-border livestock trade boom, which started in the 1990s, Burji migrants from southern Ethiopia comprised all ages and sexes and people from different economic backgrounds. After the 1990s, following radical changes in Ethiopia's political and economic administration and reduced restrictions on migration, a large number of Ethiopian youths flocked to Kenya through the Moyale border town to seek refuge, economic opportunities, and connections for onward travel to North American and European countries. Unlike their predecessors or most fellow immigrants, Burji newcomers had a soft landing because they had a well-established community that welcomed them to the new home. In addition, the new arrivals were quickly absorbed into the busy and labour intensive livestock trade.

Formation of trading partnerships is an important aspect of livestock trading in northern Kenya. While risk evasion and working capital limitations can be some of the motives in cattle trader partnership formations in northern Kenya, there are also a host of other reasons that encourage businessmen to take up trading partnerships. In some partnerships in northern Kenya large-scale traders personally have huge working capital and enormous trading tasks. Such traders need trading partners to help with procuring livestock and securing markets. On the other hand, new entrants with minimal capital seek guidance and trading tips from experienced traders and often serve as trading apprentices to the latter. Based on data from 83 livestock traders in northern Kenya, the majority of whom were Burji, 78 per cent of traders had at least one trading partner, while 22 per cent had none (Mahmoud 2003: 215). The increasing number of Burji livestock traders provided the much needed partnership in the business.

Unlike the herding community, which comprises different age groups, livestock traders are largely youthful. The strenuous tasks of cattle procurement and movement require a tremendous amount of energy to cope with the chaotic nature of the business. Consequently, youthful Burji immigrants are readily drawn into the expanding livestock trading chain to adequately cater for its

enormous labour requirements. Several studies have shown that the majority of livestock traders are youthful (e.g. Mahmoud 2003, Ring 1987, Teka, et al. 1999). For example, in a sample of 83 livestock traders in northern Kenya, the minimum age was 18 and the maximum 57 with an average age of 32 and a standard deviation of 8.3 (Mahmoud 2003: 141–142). In most cases, the age of a trader corresponds with familiarity in trade, thus it has tremendous implications on trader relations. Teka et. al. (1999: 18) found that livestock traders between the ages of 22–40 comprised 62 per cent of livestock traders in southern Ethiopia while Ring's work shows that 89 per cent of livestock traders in southern Sudan were the cohort of 14–34 years (1987: 195). Age of traders often influences trust and business loans. The higher the age the more conversant a trader is likely to be and the more creditworthy (Mahmoud 2003: 141–142). Burji traders make satisfactory progress in livestock trading while still youthful and move on to become transporters or general merchants as their age progresses.

One of the first Burji livestock traders started with a butchery shop in Marsabit in the 1970s and gradually ventured into livestock trade purchasing a small quantity of livestock and transporting them to Nairobi for sale. His consistency in the business and establishment of various clientele in Nairobi led to the growth of his business. This opened up a lucrative business vein for the Burji whose survival in northern Kenya had become precarious. Although a serious Burji involvement in the livestock trade started in the 1970s, it only thrived through the 1990s and 2000s. This propelled Burji livestock traders to venture into other forms of businesses.

Burji traders have established strong links with industrial manufacturers in Nairobi and Mombasa. Through their wide networks they are able to obtain goods at discounted prices and thus are able to supply foodstuffs, building and hardware materials, and second-hand clothes not only for local consumption in Moyale, but also for the huge south Ethiopian market. Burji businessmen and women own more than 90 per cent of the 60 plus trucks in Moyale through which they control livestock and general merchandise transportation between northern Kenya and Nairobi and the port city of Mombasa. Investment in trucks is one of the key diversification strategies. Often, proceeds accrued from many years of livestock trading are used to venture into the huge and normally lucrative cross-border trade in manufactured goods and investment in the transportation sector. Other Burji entrepreneurs have moved to the capital Nairobi to establish other forms of businesses.

Dominating Livestock Purchasing Processes

The supremacy of Burji livestock traders is clearly evident in the Moyale livestock market. Market activities begin early in the morning when cattle start to arrive from the Ethiopian side. The arrival of Burji livestock traders on motorbikes and frequently in pairs marks the beginning of trading activities because they are the largest purchasers and the show cannot commence without their assertive presence. With the use of mobile phones, Burji traders enquire their Nairobi trading partners about market conditions and prevailing prices in the capital. This information determines the level of trading and prices at the Moyale market. Throughout the trading session, which ends at about noon, Burji traders maintain close contacts with Nairobi. At the Moyale market, both traders and herders negotiate prices through a team of middlemen, who go back and forth between sellers and buyers until a both sides acceptable price is reached. At this point the respective middlemen seal the deal with a firm handshake and the cattle are immediately marked with the initials of the purchaser.

The Moyale livestock market is comprised of several market actors, but the dominant one is livestock traders, who include part-time and full-time traders. The majority of Burji traders belong to the latter category. Full-time livestock traders comprise small, medium, and large-scale traders. Generally, fundamental differences between livestock traders in different markets lie in trading capacities propelled by the size of working capital and a web of trading networks. Burji traders are mostly full-time and large-scale traders, a combination that provides them with a strong position in the livestock marketing and transportation sector in northern Kenya. Soon after Burji traders depart from the market to make arrangements for payment to livestock owners, the former's herd boys arrange to trek the purchased livestock to Manyatta Burji. Payment is not made until all the purchased cattle are safely in the purchaser's *boma* (homestead) in Manyatta Burji. The day's sellers and their middlemen congregate under the shade of a tree in front of Abdullahi Ado's shop in Manyatta Burji where payments are made. Meanwhile, Burji traders withdraw cash from their bank accounts or mostly from their homes. Payment is delayed for an hour or two to ensure all is secure and that all sellers have arrived at the venue to avoid sitting around with a bulk of money waiting to make payments.

Dominating Livestock Transportation Process: trucking

Trekking and trucking are the two major means of transporting livestock from northern Kenya to markets in other parts of the country. Trucking livestock from Moyale to Nairobi is a profitable business and the most popular mode of livestock transportation for Burji traders. The control of this crucial means that connects northern-based pastoral producers to consumers in Nairobi is of vital economic significance to the Burji. In Kenya and other African countries, for example Botswana and Somalia, livestock traders use trucks for transporting livestock to markets at times when trekking is deemed arduous (Sandford 1983). Two motorised routes connect Moyale in northern Kenya to Nairobi and other markets. The first, mostly unpaved, passes through Marsabit, Isiolo, Nanyuki, and on to Nairobi, a distance of over 700 kilometres. The section between Isiolo and Nairobi is paved, but major stretches of the road surface are in poor condition. In many parts, the Moyale-Nairobi road is a security risk. In addition, during rainy seasons, some parts of the road are impassable and truck wear and tear is much higher. The second motorised route passes through the North-eastern Province towns of Buna, Wajir, Garissa and on to Nairobi. The section between Moyale and Garissa is unpaved, while the Garissa-Nairobi section is paved and in good condition. This route is slightly longer than the first route, but safer in terms of security. Mostly sandy, the road contributes minimal wear and tear on vehicles, but it remains closed during rainy seasons.

While the Burji comprise the main cattle trading group in northern Kenya, they seldom trek animals for fear of attacks and thefts. They make this rational decision because they do not "own" any of the livestock trekking routes in the area. To facilitate easy entry into Nairobi markets, Burji merchants have made massive investments in trucks. As discussed earlier, the Burji own the majority of the trucks in Moyale and prefer to use their own trucks to transport livestock to Nairobi. Numerous advantages lie in the use of trucks for livestock transportation in the Moyale-Nairobi corridor. First, trucking is more secure than trekking, which is engulfed in disputes and trekking politics. Moreover, insecurity surrounding trekking livestock through unfriendly territories compels Burji livestock traders to use trucks extensively for livestock transportation. Second, trucking is comparatively faster and traders recoup their initial investments more quickly than through trekking. Third, through the use of trucks, Burji traders consolidate their business positions by

promoting and financially boosting fellow Burji truck owners. Fourth, it is easier for Burji cattle merchants to negotiate with fellow Burji transporters rather than dealing with strangers. Fifth, because of close business cooperation and dense trading networks among Burji merchants, credit can easily be arranged within the group. Sixth, several Burji cattle dealers have comparatively huge capital bases, in some cases in excess of one million Kenya Shillings (US\$ 12,820), and therefore disadvantages associated with soaring trucking costs do not intimidate them. Finally, trucking in northern Kenya is a trade mark associated with the Burji and resonates beyond Moyale and Marsabit Districts. While I was travelling to Moyale through the north-eastern Province in 2007, residents there complained about the deteriorating condition of their roads saying “Burji lorries have wrecked havoc on our roads.” The extensive use of the North-eastern route was prompted by the near-complete deterioration of the Isiolo-Marsabit-Moyale stretch. Although this recognition was for the wrong reason, it suffices to mention that the Burji have asserted themselves as well-established livestock and merchandise traders and unrivalled transporters and are a critical link between southern Ethiopia/northern Kenya and Nairobi.

Hegemonic practices in the livestock transportation sector are articulated in a couple of important ways. First, Burji traders have the resources to meet the high transport costs, making trucking a secluded arena for the able. Second, trucking is a community affair for the Burji. As mentioned earlier, the Burji live closely in the Manyatta Burji suburb where their trucks are also parked. It is not difficult for a Burji livestock trader to locate and negotiate with a Burji truck owner. It is, therefore, not uncommon for non-Burji livestock traders to be completely shut out of livestock trade because of the difficulties to find livestock transportation and due to its exorbitant prices. In some cases, Burji livestock traders themselves own trucks making it easy for them to transport livestock to Nairobi when and as needed. Ownership of livestock transportation means in northern Kenya is covertly polarised. While ethnic majorities clearly dominate ownership of trekking routes within their territories, minority groups only have the most expensive options of trucking. To reiterate, although trucking animals is comparatively costly, networking and large capital investment in the business can offset the expenses. Certain government departments and NGOs working in northern Kenya have overtly attempted to indigenise livestock trading by encouraging the use of trekking routes through improvement of facilities en route such as provision of water and veterinary services. The majority of Burji traders are reluctant to participate in these endeavours because of the scepticisms surrounding the move toward indigenisation of livestock marketing in the area. In addition, a faster growth for both northern Kenya and the national economy requires a quicker and more efficient delivery of livestock to Nairobi. This can only be achieved through trucking rather than trekking animals.

Livestock Trader Associations as a Buffer and Control Mechanism

Ethnicity-based business associations are rare in northern Kenya, but there has been an escalation in the number of associations and organisations involved with pastoralism in general and livestock and livestock products trade in particular. These associations can easily be identified in Moyale town from the names written on the doors of their “offices” – with catchy titles such as herders, pastoralists, pastoral women, pastoral youths, cowboys, and brokers, just to mention the most prominent of them. Some of these associations come into existence almost overnight following workshops organised by NGOs in the area. For the Burji, a trade-based association does not only bolster their economic position, but also creates a sense of new and common identity.

Moyale livestock traders have two main trader associations – the Moyale Livestock Trader’s Association (MLTA) and the Northern/Nairobi Livestock Dealer’s Association (NNLDA). The former is the most active and based in Moyale in northern Kenya while the latter is Nairobi-based. The MLTA was established in 1998 with the main objective of consolidating and addressing livestock trading issues affecting its members, particularly as a means to buffer vulnerable traders against bankruptcy, effects of highway and local robbery, and extortion of money by highway patrol police. The association is financially and organisationally stable, being active in awarding monetary assistance to its needy members. For example, one member was awarded KSh50,000 (US\$641) as general support, while another member was awarded KSh200,000 (US\$2,564) from the association and a further KSh100,000 (US\$1,282) from clansmen because of bankruptcy. While assistance from the former source (association’s bank account) is repayable, the latter is a form of a gift. Although repayment is not mandatory on the beneficiary, reciprocity is expected in the future and the recipient should extend a helping hand to other needy members of the association and the community. In another example of a gift, association members contributed KSh30,000 (US\$385) as a good will gesture to a livestock trader who lost his cattle to thieves. The association maintains its own bank account created receiving members’ subscriptions and monthly contributions. Elected officials manage the funds and accounts are checked by everyone during regular meetings. Other forms of contributions from clansmen are on a voluntary basis.

While membership size varies slightly from time to time because of dropouts and new entrants, the ethnic composition of the association never changes. Although membership is open to all livestock traders from northern Kenya, as stated in the association’s charter, all members are from the Burji community. An entry barrier to prospective traders from other ethnic groups is covertly imposed so that the services of the association are retained within the Burji livestock trader community. A strategy used to make the MLTA an exclusive Burji club is through the establishment of prohibitive joining fees and monthly subscriptions – fees which only prosperous livestock traders can afford to pay (Mahmoud 2008). These strategies also serve to make for the absence of a meaningful and visible intervention from the much talked about pro-poor policies, poverty reduction strategies, and opening up of the northern corridor for increased livestock and livestock products business advocated by local NGOs, government arid lands projects, and global development programmes.

The Burji-dominated and financially powerful livestock trader associations do not appear to have or to create a political front to address the decades old alienation of the Burji community in northern Kenya. However, these associations do provide invaluable forums through which political issues are debated and community consensus reached. For example, in the 2007 general elections the Burji community voted as a block for a particular individual perceived to be a friend of the Burji and shunned those regarded as foes. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a critical assessment on the future political role of the Burji in northern Kenya. However, it is reasonable to state that the Burji community has a political significance and influence in the local arena, and it can be speculated that these positions are likely to expand in the future.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the British-Burji encounter in a remote borderland area in northern Kenya and its consequences on the latter’s livelihoods and social and political status

during the colonial and post-colonial periods and how the community has endeavoured to address its insecure position. A wide range of factors are at the core of the emergence of a new Burji identity in northern Kenya in the past couple of decades. Historically, the Burji community both in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya has had troublesome interactions with state structures. These include aspects of slavery and oppression under successive Ethiopian rulers in their homeland in southern Ethiopia and widespread discrimination and marginalisation during the British colonial rule and the Kenyan post-colonial state. While the impacts of colonialism on African rural communities have been wide-ranging, the Burji case presents a scenario of non-violent discrimination. Using the Burji example, the paper has attempted to demonstrate why and how minority ethnic groups are inclined toward consolidation of group identities under unfavourable social, economic, and political conditions.

The Burji example lends support to Roseberry's argument that the response of the small-scale coffee farmers in Boconó District, Venezuela, to the mid 20th century crisis needed to be understood within the context of the 19th century legacies (Roseberry 1989). The British-Burji relations of the first half of the 20th century were instrumental in shaping the events (of marginalisation and responses) that continue to unfold in northern Kenya. The paper has shown the significance of historical processes and the role of policies of partiality in the construction and consolidation of group identities. The Burji case is an example of an ethnic minority's economic accomplishment and construction of a new identity under adverse conditions. The new Burji identity, in its quest to break the barriers that have haunted the community since the colonial days to the present, is expressed through exclusionary livestock trading practices.

Through the use of exclusive livestock trading strategies, Burji livestock traders in northern Kenya dominate all aspects of the trade and use it as a tool to overcome historical marginalisation and stereotyping. Neither the colonial government nor the post-colonial state granted the Burji community any special status to enable them to overcome marginality with the exception that the Burji and other minority groups were exempted from paying plot rents during the colonial rule. So it was largely left to the Burji themselves to improve their standing in society.

The endurance and resilience of Burji livestock traders in northern Kenya coupled with monopolistic trading patterns have not only given them an edge over their rivals, but also helped them create an exclusionary trading sphere to cushion against contemporary and future risks. These specialised trading practices include livestock purchasing processes, livestock transportation to the market in Nairobi, and the establishment of exclusive livestock trader associations. Although the Burji are a non-pastoral, non-indigenous ethnic group in northern Kenya, dominating the trade in an invaluable pastoral commodity – livestock – entrenches the community's claim as bona fide residents of the area through huge investments in livestock trade and in the means of transportation and other forms of mercantile enterprises.

Using extended fieldwork and historical data, the paper has contributed to our understanding of the interactions of institutions and the state – colonial and post-colonial – with rural and marginal communities and the outcomes of these relationships, which, in the case of the Burji of northern Kenya, have not been in favour of the community. I have argued that in response to these unpleasant relationships, the Burji community has sustained a long-term effort toward creating a niche for itself in the quest to overcome its marginalisation and to seek economic empowerment. Increased economic space could in turn open up avenues for an increased Burji political participation in northern Kenya in the future. However, this remains to be seen.

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