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WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PASTORAL ECONOMY:
INCOME MAXIMIZATION AMONG THE RENDILLE

by Anne W. Beaman

There is an old cliché, best expressed by Goldschmidt (1965:404), that pastoralism as a subsistence economy relies so closely on male physique and mobility that women, often burdened with pregnancy and small children, have relatively reduced social and economic roles in pastoral societies. Another rule of thumb connected with pastoralist women (and I have less argument with this one) states that they are far more actively involved with smallstock than with larger species, and that the social structure gives a more prominent place to women where the livestock herd composition includes significant percentages of sheep and goats (Rubel 1969). Wienpalh (1982) has given evidence from the Turkana to show that even this rule does not always apply. Clearly, any generalization must be examined against empirical data.

But both of these concepts ignore women's economic roles in activities not directly connected to livestock husbandry or dairying. If pastoral production is interpreted to mean primarily animal husbandry per se, then most pastoral women do have only limited roles, mostly as labor, and little control over resources. But if pastoral production is understood to include not only livestock management but the control and distribution of products, the provision of support services, and all the means whereby the domestic unit meets with subsistence needs, then it may often be found that women's contributions are substantial, and that their own skills, social networks, and initiative are as vital to the economy as men's skills and networks are in livestock management.

This paper describes the economic roles of women in one pastoral nomadic society: the Rendille of northern Kenya. As well as describing the tasks that are incumbent upon all Rendille women, I hope to show how women use individual skills and opportunities in a variety of ways to enhance their families' well-being. Some of the forces that help to shape the lives of these women are:

- (1) an economy that grows only very slowly, if at all;
- (2) the need to restrict human population growth;
- (3) a high demand for a skilled and unencumbered labor supply; and
- (4) a food supply that fluctuates widely between rainy-season surplus and dry-season deficit, giving importance to the redistribution of resources and the ability to utilize alternative sources of food.

The lives of Rendille women are sharply divided between girlhood, when their primary economic contribution is as herders and milkers of smallstock, and wifehood, when they become managers of the products of their husbands' livestock, and responsible for feeding their families in any way they can. If it can be said that Rendille men seek to maximize household capital, in the form of livestock, then it can be said that Rendille women seek to maximize

household income, in the form of food and other products. Men's preoccupation is with livestock on the hoof. Women's preoccupation is with the products of that livestock, and with developing services, skills, and exchange networks in order to improve the flow of those products into their own households.

The Rendille people live in the arid, semidesert plains east of the southern end of Lake Turkana, in Kenya's Marsabit District. Rendille-land is too arid for farming, and even too arid for cattle-based pastoralism. Annual rainfall averages considerably less than ten inches (250 mm.), and is unpredictable and highly localized, falling mainly in two seasons peaking in April and November. There are no permanent rivers or streams in the territory, and for fear of enemy raids, Rendille people seldom even approach Lake Turkana. The Rendille economy is based on camels, sheep, and goats. Camels are prestigious, are a major part of the Rendille people's self identity, and are very well adapted to the local ecology. Since they need to be watered only once every fourteen days in the dry season, and not at all during the rainy season, camels can utilize range-lands far from any water source. As pack animals, they give the people extensive mobility over long distances, and enable communities to locate as far as ten miles from the nearest water sources, bearing a 3- to 4-day supply of water for the household on their backs. With a lactation period lasting a full year, camels supply substantial milk for human consumption through rainy and dry seasons, and also provide blood and occasional meat for food. They are exchanged as bridewealth and to solidify social and economic bonds. They may not be sold for cash, nor killed for meat alone, and a man's camel herd is inherited nearly intact by his eldest son when he dies, rather than being divided up among many.

Smallstock, on the other hand, carry far less prestige. Although they vastly outnumber camels, and provide a major proportion of the milk, blood, and meat consumed by humans, they are considered expendable. They may be killed for meat, and sold on the market, and their hides are used as women's clothing or sold for cash. If camels may be seen as the savings account, or investment portfolio, then smallstock may be compared with a checking or NOW account, yielding interest, but readily spent.

Not surprisingly, camels are associated with males, and smallstock with females, in Rendille culture. This association is very strong, and it is ritually institutionalized at the birth of each child, when he or she, in the first ritual performed after birth, is connected simultaneously to the mother's home and hearthside and to the appropriate category of livestock. The association has practical applications as well, as camels are primarily in the care of young, unmarried men, and smallstock are in the care of young, unmarried girls. Rendille women may not milk or even touch female camels, and the only camel a woman owns is her pack camel, a gelded, utilitarian beast that cannot be the start of a herd or a provider of milk. But women have an important role in herding and milking sheep and goats. While I know of no instance of a woman achieving economic independence, women can own sheep and goats and may build up a small flock in supplement to her husband's resources.

Like many East African pastoral societies, the Rendille people live in mobile clan-communities of anywhere from twenty to over three hundred people. While these communities can and do move, they are more dependent on a regular water supply, and less readily mobile, than the livestock needs to be. Therefore, the livestock is kept for most of the year in itinerant stock camps, often many

miles from the home community, camels and smallstock separately in accordance with their ecological requirements. The camel camps are run by young, unmarried men, and women and girls may not go there at all. The smallstock camps are run by young, unmarried women and girls with the direction, assistance, and defense of a few men designated as smallstock specialists. In some pastoralist societies, girls do not live in stock camps. But among the Rendille, the separate needs of camels and smallstock demand a large, responsible labour supply, and make the herding skills of girls vitally important. Further, the milk supply is far better in the stock camps than it is in the home communities, and these young people are assured of better nutrition there than at home. Both boys and girls are trained as herders from young childhood, and girls expect to spend most of their adolescent years in the stock camps. While they miss their mothers and comforts of home, in later years they look back on the time in the camps as a time of freedom and camaraderie and adventure.

It is quite clear that the demands of housekeeping and childbearing are incompatible with the rustic, shifting, outdoor life of the stock camps and the requirements of herding. Therefore, the herding role of girls in the stock camps is made possible only by the postponement of marriage for most women until well into young adulthood, and by a strict prohibition on premarital childbearing, coexisting with a very relaxed attitude toward premarital sex. Most girls past the age of puberty have warrior lovers, and a sexual relationship with one lover, established through gifts of beads to the girl, is condoned and expected by the society. Pregnancy does occasionally result, and a pregnant girl must undergo an abortion administered by the women of her community. But as the men and boys of the stock camp are primarily classificatory brothers of the girls there, and as warriors both place a high value on abstinence and must bear life-long ritual exclusion if they impregnate an unmarried girl, the premarital pregnancy rate is actually quite low. When released from the need to keep house and bear children, women and girls can and do make capable herders.

As an unmarried herder in a smallstock camp, a Rendille girl's role is as laborer, not manager. She is at her father's disposal, and he may decide where her services are most needed. In the stock camp she is under the authority of the young men who supervise the camps, virtually all of them her fellow clansmen. She has no rights of ownership in the animals she cares for, and is essentially an employee. But upon marriage, a woman becomes manager of her own home, and of the products of her husband's livestock. Gudrun Dahl (1979) uses the term «milk manager» with reference to the Kenya Boran, but at least in the Rendille case this includes meat, blood, and hides as well. Since most marriages occur in association with the timing of the fourteen-year age-set cycle, the age of a woman at marriage has less to do with her own personal maturity than with how old she happens to be when an age-set of warriors become eligible to marry. Men become eligible to marry for the first time at a specific point in the age-set cycle, after eleven years of adult bachelorhood. Within a few months, hundreds of marriages take place and a whole generation of young women is transformed from girls into wives. While some marriages do take place in the intervening period, fourteen years pass before the next such cluster of marriages. This helps to guarantee a stable body of unmarried male and female herders for a predictable period of time. But it also means that, while some brides are as young as fifteen when they marry, others may be well into their late twenties, a feature that helps to control population growth as well as providing herders. A Rendille institution

known as sabade, described elsewhere (Beaman 1977a:12-17; Beaman 1977b:36-39; Beaman 1981:399-403; Spencer 1973:35), delays the marriage of some women until they are in their forties. While the extent of this delay affects only a small percentage of women, and the custom recurs only once every forty-two years, the sabade institution has significant results for population restriction. Research by Shun Sato (1977) indicates that, with social restrictions on human reproduction, human population growth is kept to a rate very close to that of the slow-growing camel herds.

The transition to married life is dramatic and traumatic for Rendille women, marked by clitoridectomy and a complete change of life study. Once married, her goal is to become pregnant as soon as possible, for only as a mother can she realize her maximum social and economic potential. She may no longer go to the stock camps, and the locus of her responsibilities becomes her house and hearthside, her house having been built for her on the day of her wedding. The economic role of a married woman can be distilled into four conceptual categories:

(1) Home maintenance tasks. These include tending the fire, dismantling and rebuilding her house for moving, repairing her house and the preparation of appropriate raw materials for this, fetching water and firewood, cooking, cleaning milk vessels, childbearing and child care, acting as hostess to guests, and other household tasks familiar to women the world over.

(2) Control and distribution of livestock products. As a Rendille woman, she does not have a specific allocated milking herd of identifiable animals given to her by her husband, but he is responsible for making sure she has at least one milking camel available at all times. Among poorer families, this may not always be possible, but the sooner she becomes a mother, the greater the pressure on her husband to provide her with sufficient milk. On the hoof, the livestock belongs to men. But as soon as the milk is delivered to the wife, she is in control of its distribution. At milking time, a wife sits in her house and waits for her milk, and when it is delivered by a small child, she pours it directly from the milking vessel into her domestic milk containers, symbolically transforming it from a raw material to a domestic product. Likewise, any animal that is killed passes into the hands of the wife. Women may not kill animals, but they are responsible for butchering and distribution. A woman decides how much meat to reserve for her family alone, and how best to distribute the rest so as to maximize other women's obligations to her. She also has the right to take the hide to market, and use the money to buy grain foods, tea, tobacco, sugar, or other items. In utilizing these products, she must know how to guarantee her family's food supply and at the same time lay the groundwork for reciprocal help when she needs it. This leads to the third category:

(3) Redistribution, or, more bluntly, begging. In an economy where there is very rarely any surplus, and much more frequently a food deficit, it is essential to the group that resources be shared. This usually takes the form of high pressure demands on any women with a sudden glut of food, as when her husband kills a sheep, or when an old camel dies, or when she returns from a shopping expedition. Women complain under the pressure of demands, and lie about quantities, and try to hide their surplus. But everyone acknowledges that begging is a necessary part of life, and that requests should not be ignored for sooner or later everyone will be in need. Contrary to the popular notion of egalitarianism among pastoralists, individual households vary widely

in terms of wealth. Enforced redistribution helps to ensure the survival of all in the community.

Therefore, women try to establish a sense of obligation in others by offering small gifts or services when they can, and they keep careful track of those who have successfully begged a share of a resource from them. Then in return they feel free to demand a portion when the other is in a position to share. Women who are not mothers are not as free to participate in this exchange, as the standard rationale for asking is that one's children must be fed. However, one's husband having sudden guests is also good reason to ask for food. A woman has established networks of women among whom she can make demands, including her own kin, her husband's kin, near neighbors, and other connections. The network changes and expands as her life develops. An acquaintance who is not part of the network before marriage may become a part of it upon the woman's marriage if the acquaintance is a clanswoman of her husband, for example. A man can be approached for favors by women of his wife's natal clan, as he is bound to respect his «wife-givers.» A skilled woman keeps a mental record of her relationships with others, in what amounts to a mental card file. These networks can be vital when hardship strikes and she must feed her family. The broader her network, the greater her chances of maintaining a consistent flow of food into her household.

(4) Special skills constitute the fourth category in a Rendille woman's economic role. These include primarily services a woman can develop and provide for others, that will make them dependent on her and provide her with an income. One of the most important of these skills is midwifery. A woman with a good record for successful childbirth assistance is in constant demand. And each time she delivers a baby, she can claim a hind leg of each of the sacrificial animals killed in postnatal rituals. Another such skill is female circumcision, for which a woman is given a live sheep, or cash. Being asked to «hold the back» of a bride during her circumcision, that is, to sit behind her and hold her firmly and comfortably around the waist during the operation, also provides a woman with the gift of a live sheep. From sources such as these, a woman may build up a small flock of her own, although they are normally kept within her husband's flocks. Hair-dressing, especially the symbolic and characteristic doko crest worn by women in certain propitious circumstances, and massage, or ritual curing, are other sources of income for women, although there are no shamans as such. Even household assistance helps to set up reciprocal obligations. Except for certain specific functions, Rendille people prefer not to think in terms of buying and selling, or wages for service, or the specific value of exchanges. But in a pattern of generalized reciprocity, and with a keen appreciation of the obligating nature of a gift, energetic women seek out ways to make themselves useful. The more a woman can use her talents in necessary services to others, the more she can maximize the income to her own household, ensuring her children's well-being, through the return of food products paid for her skills.

Thus, one cannot judge the economic role of pastoral women on whether or for how long they are herders, and whether they own and control livestock. Even in a «pure» pastoral economy, we must look beyond livestock husbandry to understand the whole story.

NOTE

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