

Charles Lane

Barabaig: Life, Love and Death on Tanzania's Hanang Plains

Bangkok: River Books, 2017

ISBN 9786167339856, 246 pp.

What can researchers do when their fieldwork reveals serious economic or political problems faced by the people they are studying? It is common enough, especially in remote nomadic hunter gatherer or pastoral groups. The researcher can refuse to be a part of such a system and abandon the research or move it elsewhere, or can use the research to build a documented account of the problems in order to bring them to the attention of the wider world. The latter course is not easy when, as is very often the case, the government is responsible.

This was the situation facing Charles Lane. Working in Tanzania for Oxfam, he became aware of a threat to the livelihoods of Barabaig pastoralists in Hanang district not far from the Serengeti plains and Ngorongoro crater in northern Tanzania. He decided to involve himself in the issue, by doing serious research, and using that as a foundation stone for political campaigning on behalf of the Barabaig. He enrolled for a D.Phil. at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, immersed himself in fieldwork, living as closely as he could to Barabaig society, participating in herding and other economic activities, and in social life, especially drinking large amounts of *ghamunga*, a local mead brewed from honey, aloe root and water.

The main intellectual product of this fieldwork was a D.Phil. dissertation (Charles Lane. 1991. *Alienation of Barabaig Pasture Land: Policy Implications for Pastoral Development in Tanzania*. University of Sussex). This analysed the Barabaig livelihood system, and its rationality, focusing on Barabaig customary institutions for pasture land management. Not understanding this rationality, the state (first colonial, then independent Tanzania) had intervened to weaken and undermine Barabaig institutions, especially in pursuit of what was initially seen as more rational and 'modern' pasture land management, and subsequent villagisation. The dissertation identified a specific threat to Barabaig land from a large-scale Tanzanian government wheat production project, funded by the Canadian taxpayer.

Based on these conclusions, Lane started a campaign to support the Barabaig who were resisting the seizure of their land. Following a 1968 agreement between President Nyerere of Tanzania and Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, Canada had agreed to help Tanzania become self-sufficient in wheat. A Canadian feasibility study identified the Basotu Plains as highly suited to mechanised dryland wheat farming on the Canadian prairie model, and reported that the land, a prime part of Barabaig seasonal pastures, was 'idle'. A National Agricultural and Food Corporation (NAFCO) was set up and authorised to take control of 70,000 acres of land the Barabaig had occupied for a least 150 years, and summarily added another 30,000

acres to its total. NAFCO officials made private use of the scheme's inputs and machinery to cultivate their own private plots. This was despite national legislation which, in principle, protected people from such land grabs. The Barabaig were not consulted, and were soon treated as trespassers on their own land. Tractors destroyed homesteads and burial sites and quite soon serious human rights abuses were reported: homes and possessions burned, women raped.

Lane gathered evidence from the Barabaig and from direct observation of these events and, with the help of the Legal Aid Committee of the University of Dar es Salaam, helped the Barabaig follow the legal procedures to reverse NAFCO's alienation of their pasture land. A court found largely in favour of the Barabaig, but only on a tiny part of the land illegally occupied by NAFCO. At appeal, a higher court found that the national interest in food security overrode Barabaig customary pasture rights. Lane campaigned with the Canadian government, and the Canadian International Development Agency and other institutions. He spoke widely in Canada, including to Canadian indigenous people – the First Nations. In 1992 the Tanzanian government set up a Commission on Violations of Human Rights in NAFCO wheat farms. This report was never made public, but it accepted that abuses had taken place and should be dealt with by the law, urged that the Barabaig be included in future planning, and that a portion of the profits from wheat farming should be devoted to improving social services for Barabaig living around the wheat farms. In 1994 the Canadian government withdrew from the project, removing what little protection their presence had provided. The project collapsed, and some of the land was returned to the Barabaig former owners. But the Tanzanian government now planned to move 900 non-Barabaig families onto the former farms.

This story is described by Charles Lane in a magnificent new book for a general readership. He uses material from his doctoral dissertation, anchored with a record of Barabaig life. This is built around a large number of photos by Lane which give a vivid account of the everyday life of the Barabaig. The book is introduced by Stephen Corry, Director of Survival International, and the campaigner and journalist George Monbiot.

In the end, the Barabaig did not achieve their final objectives; key seasonal grazing was alienated to other uses. But they resisted and left a record of how such resistance can be carried out. It is likely that stories like these will become commoner as the last remaining arid landscapes are pulled away from their customary users and devoted to alternatives. This book will be a useful resource in such situations.

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