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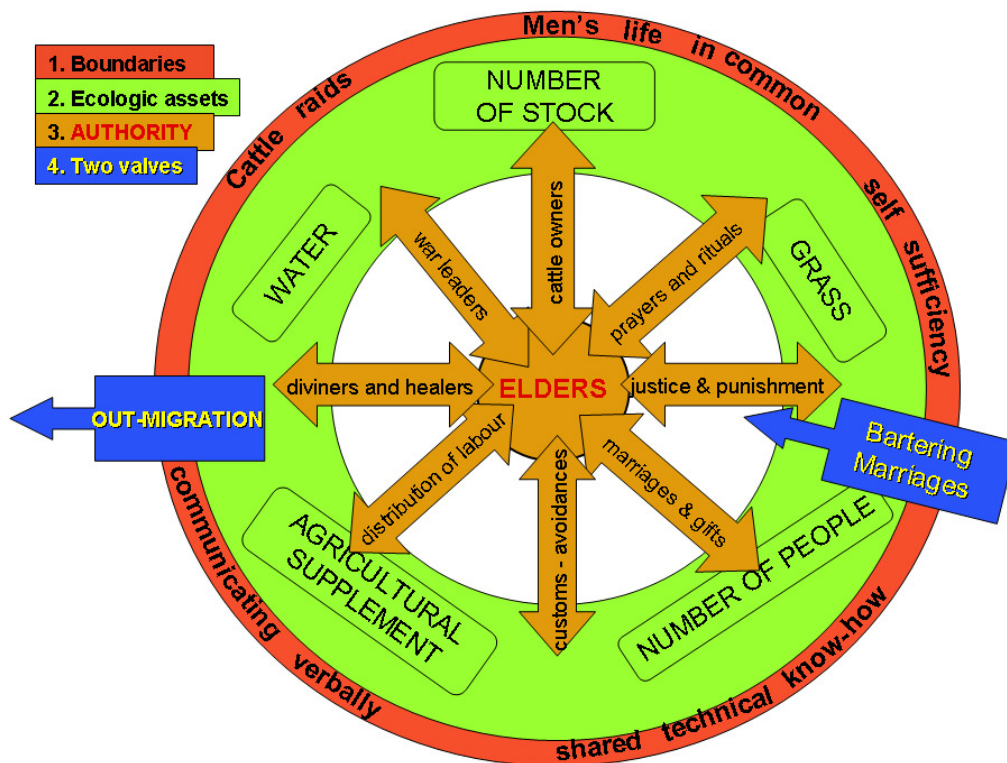
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# How the Karimojong Pastoralists manage their Territory

## Introduction

The pastoralist populations of Karamoja in north-eastern Uganda, just like so many other similar societies living in the arid stretches of land throughout East Africa, have a culture and a socio-political mind quite closed, as yet, to the rest of the world. Many outsiders (anthropologists, priests, colonial administrators, economists, agriculturalists, politicians) have tried to understand and explain their mind. Some have even gone as far as reviewing their results with karimojong Elders themselves or with some members of the population who have gone through formal education. Here below I show the result of so many observations through a diagram, which I then explain very briefly. This scheme, however, looks static, whereas one must bear in mind that for many months during the dry season the bulk of the male population leave their clans' homesteads and move out for pasture, going beyond the territory assigned to them by the British colonial government and still kept imposed that way. This diagram, therefore, must be seen as "mental", driving every pastoralist throughout his yearly journey and even during his/her whole life. Please notice immediately that nothing sounding like a "central government", a "religion" or an "outside world" enters into this scheme. As far as the Pastoralists are concerned, in spite of the 100 years of continuous presence, pressures, help and efforts by outsiders, the latter remain "outside" even when they and their logics have been staying in the region for a long time. The pastoralist societies of Karamoja have remained closed and independent.

## The ecologic circle of the Pastoralists and the social structure holding it together



The diagram proposed here above is applicable to four pastoralist societies present in the territory (Cf. population map): the Karimojong proper, the Jie, the Dodoth and the Suk/Pokot. The latter share this land only partially, as they dwell mostly in Kenya. The diagram was explained during an inter-diocesan Church conference on pastoralist populations of Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan and Tanzania (Nairobi, Feb. 1984). It was accepted as a useful key of interpretation of socio-cultural life applicable to all the pastoralist of this vast area, except for the following differences:

- The average population per square Km. in Karamoja is by far the highest;
- The violence of the Karimojong is unique in might, due to the tens of thousands of machine guns they have and to the ways they get ammunition;
- Regarding law and order the Government set-up in Karamoja is the weakest;
- The Karimojong have turned to agriculture more spontaneously, more extensively and even with more openness to modern techniques than the other pastoralist populations;
- The Karimojong are the only people who have discouraged encroachment on their land by Government agricultural or ranching schemes and have not allowed ownership of land by people coming from other Districts.

It must be noted that, starting from the 1980s, one territorial sector of the Karimojong proper, i.e. the Bokora, have divided themselves from the other territorial sectors - e.g. the Pian and the Matheniko - who have, instead, remained more united and keep cooperating normally.

The “ecologic wheel” applies independently to each of these pastoralist populations of Karamoja.

## I- Territorial boundaries through social methods

(Cf. diagram: the *outer ring in red colour*) Rather than geographic boundaries, the transhumant populations of Karamoja have social methods of separation from others and of containing their own people wherever they are.

In one word, such methods consist in socio-ethnic pride. The most active elements forming these boundaries seem to be:

- a) communal life of men,
- b) self-sufficiency mentality,
- c) cattle raiding,
- d) exclusively oral and personal communication,
- e) limited, but shared level of technical knowledge

These boundaries are the outer ring encompassing and containing their life.

If, however, one would translate the populations’ social method of separation into geographical territories, then one should, e.g., place the centre of Jie territory where there are their permanent homesteads and then spread eastward and westward to the places where their cattle are taken for pasture. The map resulting would be a rectangle for the Jie, one for the Dodoth, one for the Karimojong. In the case of Upe / Suk, the rectangle would hardly touch the Uganda territory.

The actual map of Karamoja stems back to the end of the first World War, ?? and is definitely at odds with the Karimojong map, which is wider in territory, even if it admits yearly cohabitation with settled, agricultural Lwo populations. One can clearly notice, language wise, the mixage of Lwo and Nilo-ethiopian people in East Acholi, Lango, Teso; and the almost identical language with the Turkana of Kenya and the Topotha of South Sudan.

## 2- Assets of the territory and its management

The main territorial and human assets of karimojong socio-ecologic management are five. All of them are non-monetary (Cf. words in *green background*). Their general idea is that one must adapt to nature rather than tamper with it:

1. number of livestock,
2. water,
3. grass,
4. number of people
5. supplementary agriculture

The only technique exploiting these assets is movement (transhumance). Yet each of these assets does reveal some traditional technical form of adjustment *to* and *of* nature; e.g. old, traditional “atapar” (water reservoirs for cattle), women’s conservation of agricultural seeds, house heads’ careful separation and handling of livestock according to species / age / sex / health / .... etc.

The possibility of improving cattle management by planting / cutting grass or by establishing individual ranches (cf. Ankole, instead) until now has been violently opposed, due to communal ownership of grazing lands and to competition on number of personally owned cattle.

## 3- Elders’ supreme authority

The authority managing and balancing the eco-system lays firmly in the hands of Elders (Cr. *centre of the diagram in brown colour*): wherever there are people, Elders are spontaneously there too, and gather according to needs to form a senate. Decisions are taken communally, but are not the same for all (e.g. each declares where he intends to move with his cattle). The most obvious channels through which Elders administer (Cf. the *brown arrowed spokes* in the diagram) are:

1. cattle owners,
2. their public prayers and rituals (mostly sacrifices of bulls),
3. well recognised diviners and healers,
4. war leaders.
5. their administration of justice & punishment,
6. recognition of marriages & gifts,
7. assertion of customs and avoidances,
8. distribution of labour (by age and sex)

These channels of administration stem always from tradition and are activated through formal meetings. The Elders who, at random, are present in any area where a certain problem has arisen, meet under the shade of a tree, discuss and decide. If a problem is more general, the date and place for a meeting must be established beforehand. Group leadership seems to unite mobile populations much better than single leadership locally fixed and pyramidal in structure. Mobile group leadership is vested in all adult males initiated every 25 years because they have large families, own cattle (property) and are used to share life and responsibility with the rest of the community, know how to cope with violent action. It is not salaried, nor does it entail any individual compensation. It is simply a duty.

In neighbouring Teso, a population with similar language and pre-colonial history as the Karimojong’s, the British started colonial administration very soon after seizing and forming what is now Uganda, and physically eliminated all the Elders. As the colonial government did not manage to administer Karamoja at the time, the latter’s traditional chain of command remained

intact. Due to this, no integration of the population into the rest of the Country was possible. So this is the only place in Uganda where traditional authority has remained, albeit frustrated and humiliated; apparently the present generation of elders (the “Mountains”) has remained in power since 1957. Government chiefs are superimposed and the people only see them as spokesmen of the “alien” government (“serukare” or “aryang”: Army or European). They are not mobile.

#### 4- Two “valves” in times of distress

Ideally the socio-ecologic circle is considered self-contained and self-balancing. It includes, however, two “valves” functioning in times of distress, when pressure in the circle is excessive or when a little more pressure is preferable (Cf. the two *blue arrows*).

- One is an "inlet" valve: bartering with, working for, and marrying, outside the territory;
- the other is an "outlet" valve: personal - yet massive - out-migration for a few months or years because of cattle epidemics and famine.

### The Causes of famine in Karamoja

Although the socio-ecologic circle of the Karimojong seems balanced enough, it shows its fragility especially when drought comes in, and also because this circle entails the use of violent competition over the scarce resources also between any of the other pastoralist neighbours. Thus this traditional management of the eco-system does show, in such frequent events, its internal causes of crisis, which were the same when people were just a few thousand and when guns were very few or not present.

Yet there are also causes of crisis - and pressures - coming from outside this ecologic circle and its management. These seem now to grow greater and stronger, each time causing more extensive human suffering and unbalance of resources.

These pressures have not yet caused a positive enlargement of the circle nor an indigenous improvement of its management, but rather its deterioration. The Elders’ management of the system does include learning from outsiders, as e.g. the employment of animal traction for ploughing may show. Yet the most important idea in the back of each Elder’s mind is that every improvement must be approved and directed by him and his peers, particularly as far as the society’s self-contained economy is concerned: any elder would, therefore, approve the proposal of sending young people to learn this or that technique; but then, once back home, the youngsters should be able to make and repair new products exclusively *in loco* and under their socio-economic management. Thus, the Elders do want (and at present they already have) their own medical doctors and nurses, teachers, agriculturalists, veterinaries etc. and would like to administer them without undue interference from other authorities and within a regional economy.

#### I- Ecologic and traditional causes of famine (active both before Colonialism and at present)

Some causes of general famine and other tragedies are internal to the Karimojong population and must be ascribed to them and their management. The most relevant seem to be:

- a) Cattle plagues (the most important cause of famine, as general survival depends directly on cows and only indirectly on land),
- b) Recurrent human endemic illnesses, incurable through traditional medicine and its agents.
- c) Drought (happening every 3.5 years).

- d) War mentality (causing reprisal as well as curtailing both trade and migration).
- e) No maximisation of grain storage (while it is traditionally there for cattle number),
- f) Adult males too under-employed (not exploiting agriculture enough when possible).

For example, regarding c), during the 15 years between 1943 and 1957 sorghum, which is the main staple food cultivated, failed 9 times because of insufficient rainfall. Thus cattle, grass and water are the most important factors governing the lives of the Karimojong.

One can well add other causes internal to traditional management. For example traditional laws on dowry are quite inflationary, i.e. nobody now owns – nor did anyone own in the past - as many heads of cattle as asked for marriage (70 on average), and therefore one is bound to acquire them through raiding. This is the utmost cause of violence against neighbouring populations, both pastoralist and not, and has never been put into discussion, tackled, and let alone solved, by the Elders, particularly in view of their polygamist customs.

## **2- Colonial Causes (still active at present)**

Past government efforts aiming at solving the above mentioned problems failed many times and still keep on being repeated and failing. The most negative “pushes” seem to be the following:

- a) Curtailing of grazing movements (i.e. sedentarization policies and forced labour (unproductive in traditional eyes, like forced work on main roads).
- b) Limitation of grazing lands and waters during the dry season (i.e. map boundaries, national park, game reserves, enclosures by private individuals).
- c) Splitting tribal unity through international borders (case of the Suk/Pokot).
- d) Weakening of tribal, collective leadership (through imposition of government chiefs and of monetary taxation).
- e) Deterioration of grasses and trees beyond the point of spontaneous regeneration (towns, schools and trading centres; charcoal, multiplication of water points).
- f) Trials aiming at introducing either private property of land, or government (public) land.

Regarding item b), for example, until Independence in 1962 a permit was required to enter Karamoja. Meanwhile the Karimojong were not allowed to move into Teso, Lango or Acholi to graze their cattle during the annual dry season as they had used to do. Yet in 1927 the British authorities officially allowed the Suk of Kenya to graze their cattle in Karamoja. Also during the same period Turkana raiders continued to harass the Karimojong and therefore large stretches of grazing land in the eastern part of Karamoja had to be deserted.

Thus, the grazing area available to the Karimojong became increasingly small and the Suk/Pokot, the Turkana raiders, and the establishment of game reserves (in the 1950s) caused large areas within Karamoja to be unavailable for grazing while, at the same time, the Karimojong themselves were not allowed to leave the territory to graze their animals outside Karamoja (Cf. maps of grazing patterns and of restricted land). Most of the region was a “controlled hunting area”. The grazing land became geographically smaller while at the same time overgrazing caused vegetation depletion and subsequent soil erosion and land deterioration. It is mainly because of this policy, and secondly because of the disruptive raiding activities of the Karimojong, that dams and valley tanks were constructed in western Karamoja. It seemed to the Administration that grazing would then become possible within the region.

### 3- Unbalanced inputs from technically advanced countries

Both during colonial times and later, the national government allowed church and humanitarian associations to come in and offer freely their knowhow in this or that sector of life. It also allowed alien hunters and traders to foster commerce (European, Somali). These efforts tended to be “sectorial” and paternalistic, i.e. never aimed at transplanting their actions and services into the various branches of traditional division of labour and tasks (acculturation / inculturation) and, above all, never handed their final results to the Elders, but only to local or alien *specialists*. The most massive sectors of influence seem to be the following:

- a) Guns (disrupting services, communications, migrations, work, help, causing massive shifts of cattle ownership, up to its total loss).
- b) Medical services (population explosion without development and out-migration) .
- c) Food aid (reversing out-migration; paralysing traditional as well as national intervention; strengthening government-imposed status quo).
- d) Exploitative commerce (compulsory sale of stock, excessive and exclusively monetary prices of essential commodities, local production aimed at international market - not manageable nor checkable by people - like canned meat, marble, gold, gum Arabic).

Regarding d) (i.e. “compulsory sale of stock”), since 1933 the restrictions on cattle trade were lifted in order to encourage destocking, as the animals were becoming too numerous vis-à-vis available grazing land. Some animals were exported from Karamoja and others were canned at Olilim (Iriiri) till 1967, when the canning industry was raided and the workers killed. This lifting of cattle trade restrictions and the subsequent exportation of animals did not significantly reduce the cattle population in Karamoja, because the people tended to rely on livestock as the only sure means of personal survival as well as for prestige; most often they sold only old or sick animals. Compulsory sale of cattle was also devised in order to induce taxation and the monetary economy.

By 1972 Karamoja had 696,900 heads of cattle compared to the national herd of 4,420,000. sheep were 257,550, goats 267,850, donkeys 16,500 and camels 1,650. Official figures from that time on are absolutely unreliable.

### 4- National administration

The following causes of deterioration of life, and even of chances of survival, have been caused by post-colonial governments:

- a) Recurrent national political crises (causing soldiers' banditry, disrupting of inter-district communications and trade paralysis).
- b) Breakdown of the judiciary (smuggling and robberies over international borders; state unconcern about injustices and disputes).
- c) Police inefficiency (stemming from b); unable to prevent violence).
- d) Decision-less District Administration.
- e) Lack of appropriate school education (youth not geared to better and enlarged local culture and economy, but only to the national one).
- f) Downfall of food production, of fair trade in essential commodities, of transport.

### 5- Some final remarks

The following observations may be useful to Bodies which, due to continual turnover of agents operating in Karamoja, may not be in a position to observe how recurrent famine has changed over the years:

- Famine is severe when ecologic and traditional causes happen altogether. Yet deaths seem to occur when the other causes add themselves on; of these, social causes are the most numerous (tribalism, violence, national unrest, political unconcern etc.).
- Famine coupled with human sickness becomes widespread when all causes tend to converge. Starting from 1960, the next crisis happened before a fair rebalancing of the ecologic circle could be achieved.
- Famine and overall impoverishment seem to become increasingly more general, more disruptive and more unsolvable as the overall number of inhabitants increases geometrically and remains inside the region, while all the other assets do not grow – let alone develop - at the same pace.
- Famine has not yet caused the social "point of no return" i.e. either revolution (tribal or national), or evolution (i.e. fundamental changes in social and economic structures).

Let us focus on the ratio cattle-population as the main means of traditional subsistence, to ascertain its objective trueness. After the 1980 famine there were 300,000 to 400,000 heads of cattle left in Karamoja. For a population of 350,000, this gives an average of one cow per person. It is estimated that an average family of about 10 people requires 16 litres of milk per day so that each person may get an average ration of 1.6 litres. This need can be met if such a family has seven milking cows, each producing 2.3 litres of milk per day excluding the calves' intake. This happens, however, only during the best season. During the dry season, instead, the yield of milk shrinks well below 0.7 litres per person. In it one may mix a little blood obtained occasionally from barren females and from males (usually two to four litres per cow every three to five months) to complete one's diet.

In areas where there are no cows, or very few, left, the population obviously cannot survive through traditional agriculture, as also this product is insufficient and is meant only as a supplement. This may explain the most basic facts behind violence everywhere.

All in all, the most urgent need for all seems be an enlargement of the "outlet valve" of the ecologic circle, i.e. free out-migration, while more peaceful seasonal transhumance is restored both within and without the present regional borders. This means (a) tarmac roads building (quick, secure and constant movement), and (b) improvement of cattle water services. [*Obviously there is also, a (c): the need of general disarmament, starting from the central government – which is not civil – and including surrounding nations and districts*].

Both areas of intervention (tar mark roads and water services) should begin in the region but extend westwards and southwards in neighbouring districts. Both of them should include and develop Elders' planning, administration and up keeping.

All other projects aiming at strengthening and modernising both agriculture and cattle keeping could be tried *outside* Karamoja, in peaceful surroundings, through Karimojong individuals directed by progressive instructors. Then the elders should go, see and decide.

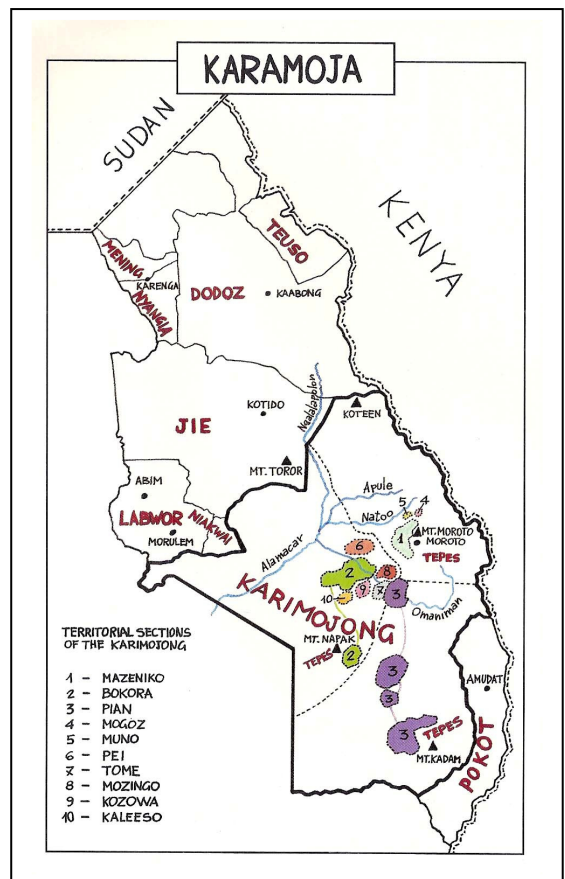
The rest of projects, aiming at diversifying structures, work, and management, should always involve representatives of Elders in their planning and management. They should always include, as well, monetary and labour participation by the local population. It will be the softest way of re-introducing taxation in the region.

In the "Pastoral Harmonization Meeting" held at Mbale the 19-25 May 2001, convened by the OAU / IBAR, and held for 4 countries and 14 communities of the Karamoja Cluster (namely: *the Turkana and Pokot of Kenya; the Matheniko, Bokora, Pian, Jie, Dodoth, Tepes, Pokot and the Labwor (Ethur) of Uganda; the Merrille and Nyangatom/Dongiro of Ethiopia together with the Toposa and Didinga of Sudan*), their final deliberations were:

1. Accelerate the improvement of infrastructure, particularly security roads and other means of transport, communication and trade.
2. Provision of basic social services, such as health and education.
3. Management and resolution of conflicts within and among pastoral communities as well as with neighbouring peoples.
4. The need for, and acceleration of, the disarmament program throughout the region on the basis of a peaceful and participatory approach.

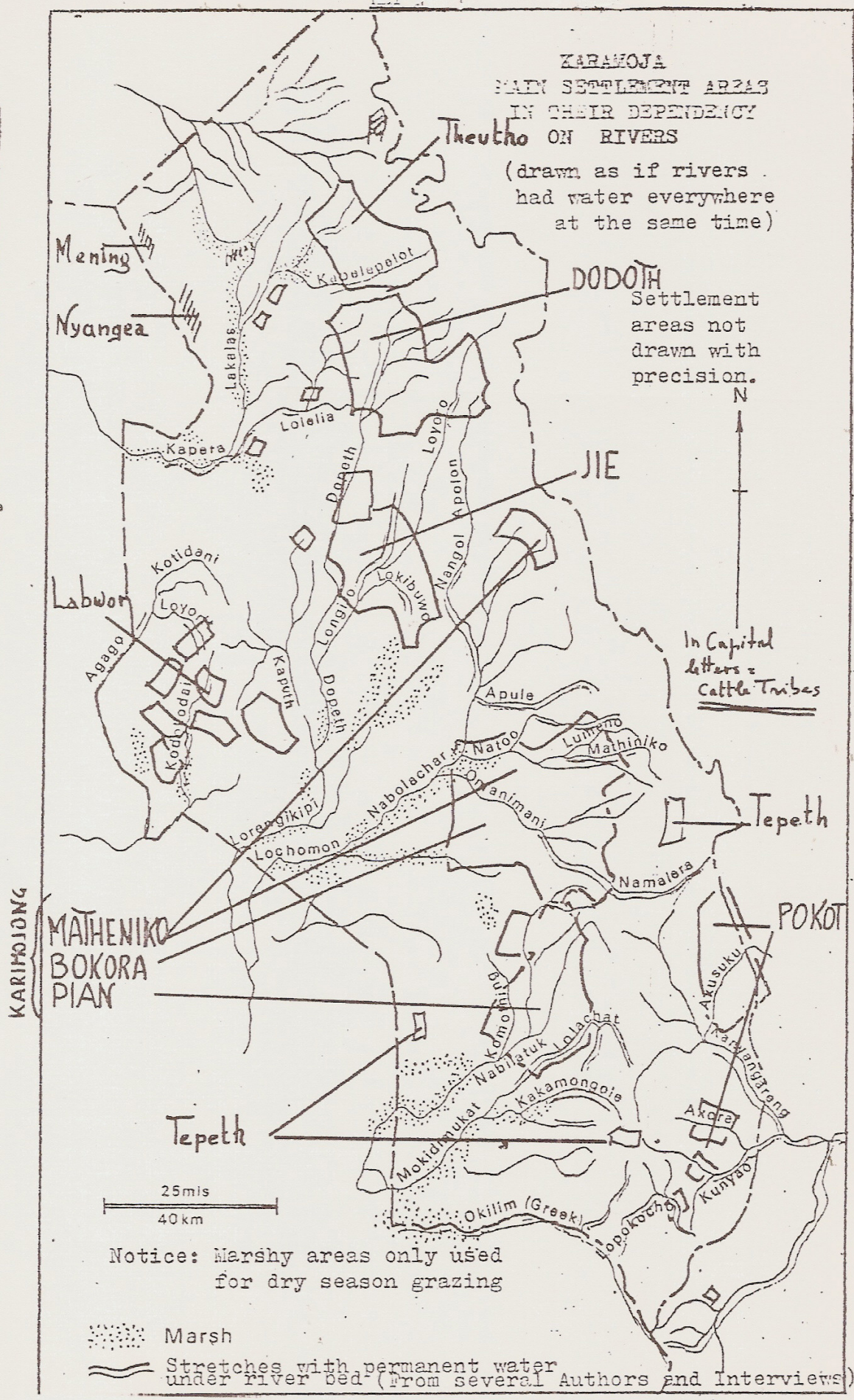
Of these deliberations, the first corresponds to the here proposed “make a tar mark”.

# MAPS



KARAWOJA  
MAIN SETTLEMENT AREAS  
IN THEIR DEPENDENCY  
ON RIVERS

(drawn as if rivers  
had water everywhere  
at the same time)



DODOH  
Settlement  
areas not  
drawn with  
precision.

JIE

In Capital  
letters =  
Cattle Tribes

KARIMOJONG

MATHENIKO  
BOKORA  
PIAN

POKOT

25mis  
40km

Notice: Marshy areas only used  
for dry season grazing

Marsh  
Stretches with permanent water  
under river bed (From several Authors and Interviews)

