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NAME-OXEN AND OX-NAMES AMONG THE DASSANETCH OF SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIA

By U. ALMAGOR

I

Social anthropologists have described the phenomenon of the personal-ox, bell-ox, favourite ox or name-ox encountered in several pastoral societies in East Africa. Their descriptions refer largely to the relationship between human beings and specific animals and the identification between the two, to the extent that the name of the ox is sometimes adopted by the person and tacked onto his own name. The relationship varies from one society to the other in intensity and form of expression. As a rule it has strong emotional overtones, as with the Nuer (EVANS-PRITCHARD, 1940: 37; 1956: 253, 279), the Dinka (LIENHARDT, 1961: 16–20) the Karimojong (DYSON-HUDSON, 1966: 100–1), and the Bari (SELIGMAN, 1950: 244). In other societies it is fairly tenuous, as with the Jie and the Turkana (GULLIVER 1952: 73; 1955: IV) and the Mandari (BUXTON 1963: 87).

Although some incidental reference has been made to the role played by name-oxen in social and economic intercourse (EVANS-PRITCHARD, 1956: 225; CLARK, 1952: 69; LIENHARDT, 1961: 14; and GULLIVER, 1955: 246) this aspect has not yet been systematically dealt with. EVANS-PRITCHARD (1956) and BEIDELMAN (1966) have been the only authors to discuss the social and symbolic significance of the ox and its sacrifice among the Nuer. Their work was based primarily on the equation of oxen as a group of castrated animals, including the name-oxen, with men and of cows with women. The purpose of the present article is to carry this analysis further and discuss certain aspects of this equation relating to the ecological, social and economic conditions of the Dassanetch of Southwest Ethiopia¹ whose rules and customs concerning name-oxen and ox-names are in many respects similar to those of the Nuer.

II

In view of the paucity of information so far published about the Dassanetch, the pertinent general background must first be sketched in.

The Dassanetch live north of Lake Rudolf and along the Omo River in Southwest Ethiopia and practice stock husbandry, cultivate grain and engage in fishing. They number around 15,000 and are restricted to a small area around which a *cordon sanitaire* was thrown by the British authorities to put an end to frequent and serious tribal clashes. Not only have the Dassanetch thus been deprived of their western pastures in the Ilelemi Appendix but Dassanetchland has become politically and economically isolated, since the British have also evacuated the Turkana and Gabbra from the adjacent territories.

¹ The data presented were collected during eighteen months of anthropological field work among the Dassanetch in 1968–70. I am grateful to the Hebrew University and the Friends of the Hebrew University in London for funding the research and to the Faculty of Social Sciences for supporting the publication of this article. My thanks are also due to Professor R. J. Z. Werblowsky, Professor D. N. Levine, Dr. P. T. W. Baxter and Dr. A. Weingrod for their valuable comments on the first draft of this article.

The confinement of the Dassanetch to a very restricted homeland has had severe ecological and social consequences. The *cordon sanitaire* denied them access to the new market centre developing in Lokitaung in Kenya, while the journey to Jinca, the nearest market centre in Ethiopia, involves crossing hostile Hamarland and is so dangerous as to be an almost impossible undertaking. Although another market center, Maji is within only four days walking distance from Kalam, this trip is also virtually impossible because the intervening territory is uninhabited and heavily infested with big game.

The loss of the western pastures of the Ilemi Appendix has intensified the already strong pressure on the available grazing grounds, Dassanetchland proper always having been a small country eminently suitable for stock-breeding. The grasslands, regenerated annually after the rainy season, are reserved exclusively for grazing, while the uncultivated areas re-emerging after the inundations of the Omo River and Lake Rudolf also produce highly nourishing animal fodder. Plentiful green grass is supplemented with other high-quality foods – sorghum, maize and bean stalks. However poor the rainfall, there is always green grass in the inundated areas, and water in the Omo River and Lake Rudolf. Distances between pastures are fairly short so that the livestock is rarely over-driven and exhausted. Hence the livestock has a rather high reproduction rate and low mortality. Infant mortality, on the other hand, is very high and the human population seems to have increased but little, if at all.

Expansion to new pastures, always difficult for a small tribe like the Dassanetch, hemmed in by such giants as the Turkana and the Borana, became impossible with the establishment of the *cordon sanitaire*. Coupled with the absence of stock markets through which the surplus may be siphoned off, this has created acute pressures on the rigidly limited pasture lands (ALMAGOR, 1972).

The ratios between the human and livestock populations and between these populations and the available pasture appear to have reached the critical point, a fact of which the Dassanetch themselves seem to be fully aware. To maintain their economic well-being and safeguard their stockbreeding assets they therefore must keep their livestock population within manageable limits.

This is done by the regular slaughter of some of their animals, which is of course controlled by various customs prescribing the right time, occasion and type of stock to be killed. Every year thousands of animals are slaughtered in different ways.

Animals are slaughtered for consumption and hospitality as well as for ritual purposes. Though the meat is eaten in either case, a sharp distinction has to be made between communal and ritual slaughter, on the one hand, and non-ritual slaughter by individual households, on the other. Only men partake of ritually slaughtered meat which is roasted, while individually slaughtered meat is boiled by the women and generally consumed by the whole family².

² The contrast between roasted and boiled meat corresponds to Levi-Strauss's (1966: 938) theory: "... the boiled can most often be ascribed to what might be called an 'endo-cuisine', prepared for domestic use, destined to a small closed group, while the roasted belongs to 'exo-cuisine', that which one offers to guests ... boiling conserves entirely the meat and its juices, whereas roasting is accompanied by destruction and loss. One connotes economy, the other prodigality".

Among the individual types of slaughter there is the 'bleeding of small stock' – *ai fasief*, – where the blood is used to avert imminent disaster. Then there is the slaughter of animals, including any surviving bulls and rams, performed on the day a person dies. During the dry season animals may be slaughtered at random to provide meat for family consumption but not everyone can afford to do so. After having performed the 'bleeding of small stock' and having slaughtered further animals for other purposes, a person may be reluctant to sacrifice still more solely for consumption. Wealthy stock-owners, however, may well kill an ox merely to provide 'meat for children' (*bul umo*). Agnates, affines, bond-partners and their relatives may then come from quite a distance to share in this "meat for children".

The communal and ritual eating of roast meat is usually confined to the male members of the stock-owner's age-set. On these communal and ritual occasions, it is the boys' task to spread green leaves so as to mark off a crescent-shaped enclosure behind which the participants are seated³. The animal is roasted and served by the host. After the meal, the guests congratulate the host on his hospitality and generosity. The ritual slaughtering and meat-eating occasions include the ceremonies of the life cycle. On the birth of a child a wether and ewe are slaughtered. For the 'smearing ceremony' (*uru*), the initiation ceremony celebrating a boy's physical maturity, several heads of small stock are killed. When a boy reaches social maturity and is transformed into a man by the hairdressing ceremony (*me tagniya*) the animals eaten are either a sheep or a goat. During his twenties a man spends most of his time with his peer group which occasionally performs the 'meat for men' (*bul kabana*) ceremony. During the dry season a group of ten to twenty young men of the same age-set build a shed surrounded by a fence, in which they spend about a month eating meat. Every participant brings an ox and on successive days each one slaughters his ox which is then eaten communally. Participants are not allowed to have any contact with their families and only age-mates may join in the feast.

Throughout the long process of bridewealth transfers, heads of small stock are periodically consumed jointly by the wife receiver and his wife-givers. When the bulk of the bridewealth has finally been transferred, the 'departed oxen' (*it galan*) and 'household' (*gol*) ceremonies are performed by the bride-receiver, at each of which several oxen are slaughtered. Another communal ritual occasion is the slaughter of a person's name-ox, *ain bisiet*, 'the animal of the colour'. Stock owners usually keep a small herd of name-oxen and every few years "give" one to their age-mates, who spear and eat it. Moreover, when age-mates, bond-partners or affines visit a prosperous stock owner during the dry season he may slaughter a sheep or goat in their honour.

Though these life cycle ceremonies are spread over a span of many years and involve the slaughter of a large number of stock, the total is still small compared with that butchered during the circumcision and above all the *dimi* ceremony. At neither is the meat roasted and consumed communally, but is prepared and boiled by the celebrant's family. Circumcision is generally performed late in life, towards the end of the twenties or the beginning of the thirties, usually at about the same time as the marriage ceremony.

³ This further bears out Lévi-Strauss's (1966:938) statement that: "The boiled is cooked within a receptacle while the roasted is cooked from without; the former thus evokes the concave, the latter the convex".

About ten heads of small stock are slaughtered during the ceremonial month, but together with the animals killed after the wedding for the guests who come to take part in the celebration a considerable total is arrived at. The greatest butchery, however, takes place at the *dimi* ceremony performed annually at the height of the dry season.

The *dimi* ceremony is the central event in a man's life and is performed simultaneously for all fathers in the territorial section whose first-born daughters have reached the age of eight to ten and are ready to receive the blessing of the old 'bulls' (*ara*), the elders of the senior age-set in power, towards their future marriage. The blessing extends automatically to all the other daughters, including those not yet born. The *dimi* ceremony involves the slaughter of nine to ten heads of cattle and about thirty heads of small stock. Throughout the six weeks of *dimi* the family of the 'man of *dimi*' is exclusively preoccupied with preparing and serving food to the guests. The ceremony reaches its climax in the last three days when the man of *dimi* is required to slaughter a head of cattle a day. Thousands of Dassanetch flock to the *dimi* settlements for a non-stop three-day meat feast. In 1969, which may well be taken as an average year, 132 'men of *dimi*' were counted.

Hence evidently huge numbers of animals are killed every year, but while animals may be sacrificed purely for household consumption, most of them are slaughtered in accordance with prescribed custom. Thus, although the numbers slaughtered may vary from one household to the other, a more or less equal annual rate is maintained. Moreover, custom ensures that most of the slaughtering is done during the dry season. In this way the Dassanetch not only supplement their diet but also reduce the number of their livestock which would otherwise crowd the poor dessicated pastures. Since most of the meat is eaten communally by the men, the women are deprived of this source of food at a time when the milk output is at its lowest. To offset this inequality, a stringent law prescribes that no man may drink milk for two days after having eaten roast meat, so that what little quantity of milk is available is reserved for women and children. During the dry season, moreover, social activities are almost entirely confined to men and centred on the slaughtering and distribution of meat. Men spend most of the day together and return to their camps only to sleep. Age-mates sometimes spend several days together at a stretch without going back to their camps, which at this time of the year are inhabited almost exclusively by women and children and are practically devoid of social activity.

III

Upon his birth every child receives a 'cow of the navel' (*se honir*) from his father as well as 3-4 heads of female small stock. If the child is called after someone, his name-giver likewise presents him with a 'cow of the name' (*se meto*). These gifts serve as the nucleus of a man's future herd, since he is the sole owner of these animals and their offspring. Women have no herds of their own and are never entitled to possess any right in stock whatsoever.

Like other pastoralists, the Dassanetch identify men with cattle. According to them

“a man and his herd grow together”; as a boy grows and develops socially, so should his herd.

This attitude has obvious implications regarding a man's developmental cycle. His herd is expected to change concomitantly with the expansion of his range of activities and social relationships. As long as the male members of the household are unmarried, they are prohibited by custom from owning a bull and the family herd is treated as one, the sons' individual ownership rights notwithstanding. It is only upon his marriage that a man is entitled to own a bull and expected to establish his economic and social independence. Usually, unless he is the first-born, he leaves his father's and brothers' household, taking his own stock with him to set up his own household in whatever camp he chooses to join. The first-born generally remains at home until his father dies.

During his bachelorhood a man's agnatic relations are predominant. Together with his father and unmarried brothers he takes care of the household herd. Milk is not allocated according to individual stock ownership but consumed jointly by the whole household. It is at this time that a man accumulates most of his stock. During the first ten years of his life his herd keeps growing steadily, since practically none of his animals are slaughtered. The following ten years are spent with the flocks and herds in the stock camps, when again next to none of his own stock is killed. During his twenties, he no longer goes after the herd and but rarely helps his family in their agricultural pursuits. He generally spends his time with his own age-mates, occasionally raiding neighbouring tribes or slaughtering name-oxen, but still augmenting his stock. Upon his marriage a man's herd is at its peak. Henceforth it is gradually diminished by regular slaughter and various transactions. It is then that he starts to assume responsibility for others which imposes a duty to slaughter animals at regular and fairly frequent intervals. In addition to having to provide for his own family, he assumes the role of a host. Offering hospitality and entertaining others is a means to strengthening and enlarging his social relationships. At this stage of life social relations are a crucial factor since there is little cooperation with agnates and complementary ties are needed to meet the economic and social demands made upon him. It is then that he is held to be most vulnerable to occult attack on his family and is therefore more exposed to misfortune than a bachelor.

In every instance of the 'bleeding small stock' ceremony that has come to my attention it was performed by husbands or fathers on behalf of their families. By definition, the slaughter of animals accompanying the long process of bridewealth transfer and its ceremonies also occurs, after marriage. The regular animal slaughter reaches its apex with the *dimi* ceremony that makes a Dassanetch a 'big man' (*ma gudo*) at the expense of most of his herd. Henceforth he must live up to his new status, which means further slaughter in a constant show of hospitality and generosity. Demands for the allocation of bridewealth also usually increase at this stage. More people have claims on him for the distribution of bridewealth while the debts generally incurred for the proper performance of the *dimi* ceremony can only be paid back over a period of many years. Thus a man can never really recover from the great loss of the *dimi* ceremony and its subsequent status demands, however much his remaining herd may multiply. By the time he becomes an elder his herd has been substantially reduced.

Hence, when the Dassanetch identify a man with his stock, asserting that he and his cattle grow together, they imply that ideally during the full span of his life a man raises his own herd from birth to maturity, spends it during maturity, and sees it diminish with his own decline so that by the time he dies he has no stock left to bequeath to his sons. In fact I have met very few Dassanetch who inherited more than a few heads of livestock from their fathers.

So much for the individual stock owner. When the household herd is, however, regarded as a single unit a man can freely dispose of his own stock by slaughter or otherwise without endangering his subsistence, as long as his sons retain their dairy stock providing milk for him and the rest of the family. Accordingly, from the time he reaches adulthood by marrying and producing children the Dassanetch converts his stock into a complex network of social relationships. Before his marriage, while still engaged in herding, he already starts building up his social and economic status by entering into bond-partnerships. These partnerships, which continue to be established up to elderhood, together with useful affinal ties and relations with age-mates, are the essential means for the attainment of economic and social independence by setting up a separate household, distinct from that of father and brothers.

The clan a man belongs to has no territory or political organization. It is not a localized or cooperative unit in any sense, and people belonging to the same clan are unable to trace any genealogical relationship and share no common ritual. The clan is merely an exogamous group of putative common descent. Considering also that stock is not handed down from father to son, the kinship group confers neither social nor economic status upon its members. The dispersal of brothers upon their marriage leaves little room for economic cooperation along agnatic lines. A Dassanetch therefore has to build up his economic and social status by his own endeavours. His relations with the members of his age-set play a major role in his career. In contrast to the weak and non-cohesive kinship groups, the age-set system is highly organised and forms the central political institution. Age-sets have their own traditions, culture heroes and meeting places. Their activities cover almost every aspect of their members' social life. Members of the same sub-age-set have a strong sense of solidarity and affiliation.

As I was told by one informant "What is *tur* (clan)? *Tur* is nothing. Every man has a father. *Hari* (age-set) is important. A man grows up in his *hari*. How can a man live without a *hari*?" Accordingly, although a man is related to his father by patrilineal descent, his social position is determined primarily by his age-set membership and above all by his vigorous participation in its activities.

A son belongs to the alternate age-set to that of his father. From infancy playmates of the same annually recruited age-set become what I would term immediate age-mates. Together they undergo the ceremonies that mark the various stages in their lives, such as the transformation from boyhood to manhood by the 'hairdressing' ceremony and circumcision. As they grow old together they advance in the political hierarchy of the age-set and eventually, in old age, they become their age-set's senior sub-age-set. When the Dassanetch say that a man grows up in his own age-set, they refer to the fact that in all the major events of his life he is closely associated with, and accompanied by, his immediate age-mates.

IV

Upon his birth a person may be called after some other person or be given a name relating to an event that occurred at about that time, the place where he was born or to some animal. The animal after which he is called may be a cow, like *segudo* (big cow) a bull, like *argo* (having a bull) *arlal* (the dance of the bull). It may also be an ox, like *yerar* (a yellow ox) *yerbur* (a red ox) *yerongor* (a black ox). Generally the colour of the ox is that of his father's name-ox, though the name the child is given at birth is not his ox-name but what the Dassanetch call 'his little name' (*me ninika*) or 'pot name' (*me hibil*), referring to the coffee pot kept boiling during the ceremony of name-giving. It is by this name that he is called and known throughout his childhood.

About the period of the initiation rite marking his physical maturity the boy selects among his oxen the one that will serve him as name-ox. There is no definite time set for making this choice which may be also made a few years before or after initiation and is not connected with any ceremony. Considerable social significance is, however, attached to the fact that the choice is made by the boy himself, constituting his first step towards independence and coinciding with the period when the age-mate relationship becomes paramount. The boy is likely to select a big, handsome animal having his favourite colour or colours, for it need not necessarily be uni-coloured, provided its colours are different from those of his father's name-ox. When the boy was originally called after an ox of a given colour – that of his father's name-ox – his own name-ox must consequently be of a different colour. In this respect the Dassanetch resemble the Dinka (LIENHARDT, 1961: 19) except that their explanation is different. Since fathers and sons belong to alternate generations in the age-set system, they must not have name-oxen of the same colour.

An ox having the chosen colour or the designation of a given ox as the chosen one still does not constitute a name-ox. It becomes such only after the following steps have been taken:

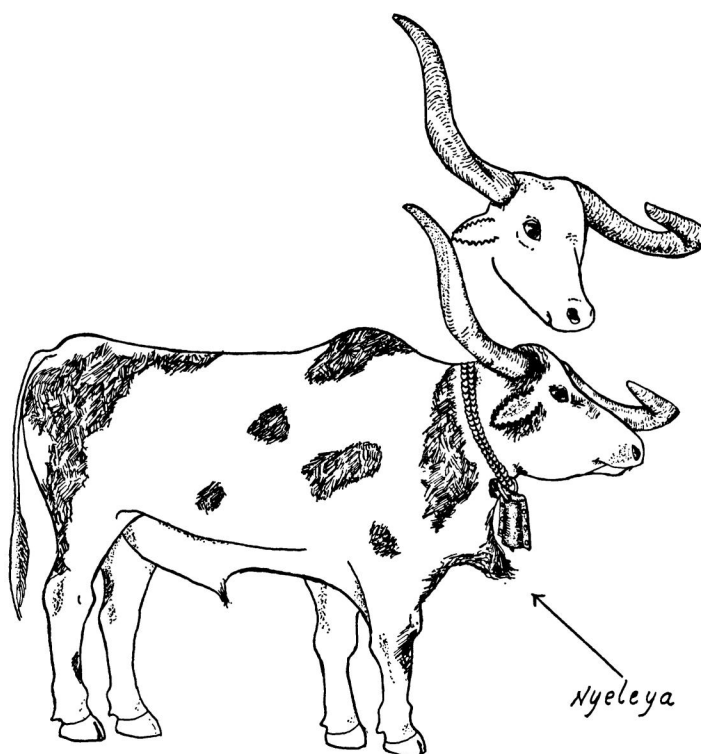
- a) Excision of the lower part of the pendulous neck of the ox (*whatcha*) leaving a protrusion (*nyeleya*) (see drawing), like the hindpart of the foreskin left after circumcision.
- b) Cutting zigzag wedges out of the ears so that they come to look like serrated leaves (*ne xieriti*) (see drawing)⁴.
- c) Putting a bell (*nyakbudonte*) round the neck of the ox.⁵

Generally both horns of the name-ox are inclined forward and downward, but when the owner of the ox has killed an enemy from a neighbouring tribe and his

⁴ The Turnyerim – the holy clan of the Dassanetch whose members, the 'men of god' (*gal waqiet*) serve as religious functionaries at the major ceremonies – also cut the ears of their cattle in this way except that the serrations are bigger. Here the serrations together with various scars on the body serve to brand the cattle as belonging to this clan.

⁵ A similar operation is performed on cows which past their prime and were very productive (*se bisiet*) but the excision is longer, though the *nyeleya* protrusion is left in this case as well. The difference, according to the Dassanetch, is that with the name-ox the *nyeleya* is "on top" and with an old cow – "at the bottom". Old cows are also decorated with a bell (*done*). Unlike the *nyakbudonte* this bell, however, has two lateral openings through which the tongue is visible.

wife has born him a child, the horns are bent asymetrically, the right horn turning up and the left one down (see drawing). The artificial downward bending of the left horn is called *karu gali doi* and is done by first beating against it with a stone and then tying it to the ox's nose⁶. According to the Dassanetch the position of the trained horns is the same as of a man engaged in a duel, with his right hand uplifted to land a blow on his adversary.



Dassanetch name-ox

Only oxen proper, that is, castrated bulls whose testicles have been cut and voided of their contents, can be turned into name-oxen. Non-castrated calves cannot be made into name-oxen. However, when a calf of the right colour is born the ends of its ears (*ne ero mui mure*) are snipped off to indicate that it is destined to become a name-ox after its castration.

Once the name-ox has been chosen and properly branded and marked, its owner takes its colour for his name (*yer mit*). The colour, once adopted, cannot be changed and the colour of ox and ox name – the 'big name' (*me gudokha*) – is synonymous. Thus the form of question used to elicit a person's name is "*bisku a teyi?*", "what is your colour". Nevertheless a person's name is subject to variation since, in addition to the

⁶ The shape of the trained horns is very similar to that used by the Nuer – see Seligman, 1950: 35 and Evans Pritchard 1956, plate XIII.

basic colour, the name is also supposed to take into account the particular shading and markings of the name-oxen, of which a stock-owner usually has more than one. With one the back may be lighter, another may have a broad spot on its right flank or a mottled eye, and the overall shade of the colouring may vary. The name describing each specific combination of shade and marking is added onto a person's name after the ox has been killed and eaten by his age-mates. All the age-set members who have partaken of the ox are entitled to refer to the person by that name but all the rest, who are usually ignorant of the specific name of the name-ox that was killed and eaten, address him as 'the father of' or by his regular ox-name, taken from his favourite name-ox which is generally kept alive. This favourite ox or personal ox is called 'the big animal' (*ain gudakha*) while all other name-oxen that are from time to time killed and eaten are *ain ninika* or 'small animals'.

It is with his personal ox that a man is properly identified and whose basic name he bears as his 'big name' in the full sense of the word, remaining unchanged for many years.

Personal oxen are also used for social interchange. When no calf of a man's own colour is born over a long period of time or, as the Dassanetch put it, "the colour refuses" (*bis le dite*), he looks for a calf of the same colour in someone else's herd for which he may give an ox or even a cow in exchange, if the other herd-owner is a stranger. But if such a calf is born to the herd of a bond-partner or an immediate age-mate it is transmitted to him for his herd of name-oxen. No exact reciprocity is practiced in these exchanges because the recipient does not always have a calf of the donor's colour. Consequently an interesting exchange network develops, the resulting gift and debt relations being a further means of forging social ties. Calves and oxen used as name-oxen are not usually exchanged between people who are not close to each other⁷. This is not considered an ordinary transaction but is charged with the emotional investment a man makes in his name-ox, and is a privilege reserved to one's familiar friends. The recipient of a name-ox gift owes a debt to the donor, who is generally invited to a ritual meat-eating feast even if he does not belong to the same age-set as the recipient; but the animal slaughtered for this purpose need not necessarily be a name-ox. As a result the relationship between the two becomes still more intimate, and the recipient may offer the donor an animal by way of gift by which he does not, however, discharge his debt. I have encountered several cases where the recipient used his social influence elsewhere, so that the donor may receive a calf bearing his name-ox colour from someone totally unrelated to him.

Not only calves and oxen but also name-ox-bells serve as an object of exchange. These bells are made of interwoven pieces of leather and metal and are in fairly short supply, since they are not easy to manufacture. Hence a person might exchange as much as two or more heads of small stock for a single bell.

⁷ I have been told by several informants that wife-givers generally do not give name-ox-coloured calves or oxen to the wife-receiver even if he has not got a single name-ox in his herd, unless he has transferred the round dozen of cattle he owes for the legitimation of his children. Name-oxen are, as a rule, not transferred as bride-wealth. Only in rare cases where a person has become involved in a serious dispute with his wife-givers, may such an animal be so transferred as a special token to re-establish social relations and place them on a firmer basis.

On the whole the ways in which a man's identification with his name-ox are manifested are about the same as with the Nuer (EVANS-PRITCHARD, 1940: 37) and the Dinka (LIENHARDT, 1961: 17), but there are some additional features demonstrating the totality of this "identification" (SELIGMAN, 1950: 169). Thus the Dassanetch openly assert that "the name-ox is the man" (*ma yab oba ain bisiet le tigre*). Moreover, as a rule there is no homicide, sanctioned or otherwise, among the Dassanetch. A man caught in adultery cannot be justifiably killed, but a man killing another's name-ox may be punished with death.

One of the cattle camps I came to in the Kuraz mountains was in a state of uproar, with a man running about among the huts, screaming: "I am dead, what shall I do, I am dead". When I asked what he was screaming about I was told that his name-ox had been seized. Upon further inquiry I found out that his herd of 21 heads of cattle had been impounded by a Kenyan police patrol near Kibish on the grounds that it had crossed the *cordon sanitaire*. At the subsequent assembly of the man's age-mates who rushed in from different camps no-one mentioned the rest of the herd, which included several milk cows, but they all kept telling me that "our man has been taken". They then went to the local Ethiopian police station and gave warning that they were about to attack the Kibish station to retrieve the name-ox. Thanks to the intervention of several Ethiopian officers the herd together with the name-ox was returned the next day and an armed clash was averted⁸.

Most of the songs the Dassanetch dance to in the evenings have to do with their name-oxen, and the ones that evoke the greatest excitement are those that describe the animals' attributes. Not infrequently a man will lift up his right and lower his left arm in imitation of the trained horns of his name-ox and while extolling the virtues of this animal emit a battle cry and fall to the ground in a fit of cataplexia. Those who have joined him in song and dance are seized by a similar frenzy. Their friends will then rush up to them to massage their limbs and help them recover. The name-ox also arouses the Dassanetch's aggressive instincts. Frequently, after a name-ox has been slaughtered and eaten, a group of age-mates goes out to raid the village of a neighbouring tribe.

Much time is spent in taking care of, and showering affection on, one's name-ox. Children mould little oxen out of mud and paint them with their favourite colours. The name of the name-ox is frequently used as a simple exclamation of joy. Love and courting songs as well as the songs of heroism and courage chanted during a raid all refer to the colours and virtues of the beloved name-ox. Throughout his maturity a man always keeps a careful check on the physical condition of his name-oxen. When the slightest sign of weakness, ill health or injury is discovered, the bell is removed and the animal is demoted from its status. Generally it is slaughtered right away and eaten by its owner's age-mates, because "The name-ox must not be ill. If the animal is ill the man will sicken, too, and if the ox dies, so will the man, for aren't they one and the same?"

⁸ Essentially the same reaction to the seizure of a man's name-ox has been noted among the Turkana (Gulliver, 1952:73).

V

One of the first things that impressed me in Dassanetchland was not so much the scope of animal slaughter but the behaviour demonstrated by the Dassanetch on these occasions, especially when it was cattle that was being killed. Pastoralists are notoriously reluctant to slaughter stock on which their livelihood depends, grieving over the loss of every animal which is at best accepted as a necessary evil⁹.

Not so with the Dassanetch, who not only show no grief but usually a kind of malicious glee, especially during the *dimi* ceremony, when a considerable number of animals is killed over a fairly short period. It is regarded as a special honour to be asked to kill a head of cattle on this occasion, and the spearing is watched by everybody with a smile and with an obvious sense of expectation and exhilaration. If the animal fails to collapse at the first stroke everybody stands around smiling and joking. Only on one occasion is there any real grief shown – when a man's name-ox is slaughtered. For the proper performance of this ceremony the name-ox must be in perfect condition. If the animal lacks a horn, has been injured in a fight with a bull, is ill or suffers from any other bodily defect or injury, no ceremony is performed and no dancing takes place. The animal is killed outside the enclosure and eaten ritually exclusively by its owner's age-mates. In this case the Dassanetch are wont to say that "the status of the name-ox is the same as of an ordinary ox" (*wutchitch le at yer*). When the owner of the name-ox is ill or in mourning, no ceremony is performed either. For the performance of the ceremony a person does not offer his own name-ox but is asked by his age-mates to give it to them. No reason need be cited for this request, but in several instances I heard them say they were hungry. Generally the request is not refused, the standard answer being "I have heard you, you may go" (*yu male itin siedi*), which means the ox is due to be slaughtered the next day. When I asked whether it was possible to refuse, I was told "Why should a man refuse? Aren't those the members of his own age-set (*hari*)? How can a man deny the request of the men of his age-set (*kabana*)?" Once the man has given his consent, his age-set members start painting themselves with red and yellow to appear in his camp the following day. The name-ox is speared inside the enclosure by an age-mate nominated by the age-set members. The person who does the killing also keeps the ox-bell for himself¹⁰. During the spearing of his name-ox the owner steps aside so as not to watch the proceedings, and unlike all the rest he is not painted and decorated with feathers and does not share in their joy and elation but is rather sad and depressed. He sits apart from the rest, is not allowed to eat of the meat, and gives the air of one whose whole world has tumbled about him.

The prohibition against eating the meat of one's own name-ox is absolute. When I asked whether there were circumstances under which this might nevertheless be done I was told with no little surprise that "A man cannot kill his own ox because that would be like killing himself and he cannot eat its meat because it would be like eating himself."

⁹ See Evans-Pritchard, 1951:112; Lienhardt, op. cit: 19; and Buxton, 1968: 37.

¹⁰ This bell (*nyakbudonte*) is always passed on to an age-mate of the name-ox owner, while the *dome*, the bell of a fertile and old cow, is passed from father to son.

The name-ox killing ceremony is attended also by others not belonging to the owner's age-set, but the seating arrangement for the subsequent consumption of the meat is strictly by age-set. Each age-set, according to its seniority, receives its portion from that part of the body that is customarily due to it. Only half the meat is eaten at a sitting. Afterwards the dancing (*fuin*) begins, in which both the owner's male and female age-mates take part. The women have their bodies painted yellow. The men line up on the right and the women on the left. They all skip and run about among the huts, singing aloud, with the men ecstatically calling out the names of their own name-oxen, imitating the motions of tackling and killing a foe, and then falling to the ground, their bodies cramped and contracted, to be taken care of by their friends¹¹. Afterwards the men again sit down in the order of their age-sets behind the crescent-shaped enclosure of green leaves to finish off the meat that is left. The representatives of all the other age-sets then congratulate the age-set of the ox owner, whereas in all other instances where an animal is slaughtered and eaten the congratulations and benedictions are addressed to the person who has donated the meal. The ceremony is concluded by the age-set members taking the head of the slaughtered animal and sticking it on a pole or on the roof of the owner's hut, its muzzle pointing to the east.

The fact that participation in the name-ox killing ceremony is regulated by age-set affiliation and that the animal killed must be flawless seems to be connected with the sacred status of the name-oxen, which are also referred to as the 'animals of God' (*ain waqiet*). According to Dassanetch tradition the killing of an ox was one of the central events in the genesis of the tribe. One of their genesis myths tells of the first ox named Dassanetch which was killed and ritually eaten by a group of persons of different age-sets—who were the ancestors of the present Dassanetch. Thus participation in the name-ox ceremony is not on a personal basis but on grounds of age-set affiliation. A person who is on bad terms with the name-ox donor but belonging to the same age-set must nevertheless take part in the ceremony because otherwise "he will have problems with his age-mates", as the Dassanetch put it. Name-oxen are clearly identified with age-sets, and it is commonly said that the name-oxen belong to the male members of the age-set (*kabana*). The killing of a name-ox also is the only occasion when there is institutionalized joking relationship among the age-sets.

It is only when he marries that a man is entitled to have a bull (*ar*) in his herd, but it does not belong to him. All the bulls are the property of the older members of the senior age-set, who are likewise called 'bulls' (*ara*). Their ownership rights are implemented by the control they exercise over every change that occurs in the status of all the bulls attached to the individual herds. The consent of the 'bulls' is required for any calf to be set aside as a bull. This consent is usually made contingent upon the married herd-owner killing several heads of small stock and offering coffee to the 'bulls'. When a bull's fertility has declined and the herd-owner wants to castrate it he must likewise first receive the authorisation of the 'bulls', one of whom must be present when the castration is performed. An ox which at one time served as a bull is called *zor* or 'after bullhood'.

¹¹ For similar expressions of courage and bravery, see Clark, *op. cit.*

Worse, however, is the sudden death of a bull, for according to Dassanetch conceptions a bull can never die or be killed. The herd-owner then finds himself in the unpleasant predicament of being heavily interrogated by the 'bulls' as to whether he might not have been guilty of malicious intent against any of them. In expiation and to prove his innocence he must kill several heads of cattle or sheep and goats and offer coffee to the 'bulls'. Once they are convinced of his innocence they go up to the body of the dead bull and by several symbolic strokes on its testicles convert it retroactively into a *zor* to indicate that the animal that died was no longer really a bull.

The idea that anyone might slaughter a bull is unthinkable. It is, as the Dassanetch say, like murdering one of the 'bulls'. Upon a person's death his bulls are put to death on the same day together with his name-oxen. The bull or bulls are killed by one of the 'bulls', after a symbolic castration ceremony, while the name-oxen are killed by one of the deceased's immediate age-mates.

Every few years a person gives one of his name-oxen to his age-set to be slaughtered and eaten. He starts doing so from the time he becomes a man (*kabana*), at about the age of 18 to 20. A man is supposed to have name-oxen only until his oldest son marries, when he should give them all to his age-set. A man who has only daughters is supposed to keep his name-oxen until his death. These rules are, however, not always kept. Many prefer to give up their name-oxen already a few years after the *dimi* ceremony, at the same time giving up their ornaments and other items of male dress which serve as a means of sexual attraction or have some phallic significance. This is justified by their having become 'big men'. Several men without male children or married sons, when asked why they had no name-ox, have asked me in return "aren't I a big man"?

VI

Unlike the simple equation of oxen and bulls with men and of cows with women, which EVANS-PRITCHARD has found among the Nuer, the relationship among the Dassanetch is more complex. Oxen and cows are clearly equated with two distinct types of solidarity owed by a livestock-owner to his kinship group, on the one hand, and to his age-set on the other. Solidarity with the kinship group, generally restricted to the father, the mother, brothers, wife and children is transgenerational and vertical and expressed through the inheritance of the cow's bell (*done*), whereas a man's solidarity with his age-set is based on his relationships with his coevals during his lifetime and is horizontal, symbolized by the passing on of the ox-bell (*nyakhudonte*) among age-set members. The first type of solidarity with the production and consumption unit, characterised by social and biological continuity, is symbolised by the cows which supply milk to the whole household and keep on reproducing¹². Oxen, on the other hand, stand for lack of continuity and productiveness and the identification of the name-oxen, representing all the oxen, with the age-set is significant. Neither constitutes a productive unit

¹² Dassanetch women are called by the same names as are applied to stock. A primipara is called *rut* (the name of a she-goat that has dropped from one to three kids) and a woman who has borne two or more children is called *se* (cow). A woman who has been very fertile is known as *se bisiet* (a cow that has dropped more than eight calves).

and both lack biological continuity. There are three distinct aspects in which identification of the name-ox with masculinity and the age-set is made manifest:

- a) *Fighting* – The training of the horns to resemble a man's fighting stance after the owner of the ox has killed an enemy and the effect which name-ox songs have of stirring people up to assaulting some other tribe. Fighting among the Dassanetch is strictly an age-set affair, and solidarity of fighters is a supreme value.
- b) *Virility* – The piece left after the incision of the name-ox's neck is called by the same name as the piece of foreskin left on circumcision (*nyeleya*). The circumcision ceremony is attended exclusively by age-set members and generally a person is circumcised together with his immediate age-mates in the year the ceremony is held by his age-set. The *nyeleya* stands for virility but not necessarily for fertility. The period during which a person owns one or more name-oxen more or less coincides with his span of sexual activity, including premarital and extramarital relations that are not necessarily bound up with fertility. Songs lauding name-ox attributes are used to woo girls with whom a man has premarital and extramarital relationships. His age-mates are usually let into the secret and stand by him in case he becomes involved with the father and brothers of the girl.
- c) *Sanctity* – The serration of the name-ox's ears, which is performed in essentially the same way as the sacred clan of the Dassanetch, the Turnyerim, brand their cattle, and the myth of the slaughter and ritual eating of the first ox by a group of men. The striking feature of this myth is that the genesis of the tribe is ascribed to men banding together and becoming a single unit by the very act of eating, while the element of continuity is dismissed with some vague reference to the offspring of those original eaters. The mythical eating of the first ox called Dassanetch and identified with the tribe confers sanctity upon every ritual communal eating of a name-ox by the age-set, the only cohesive social unit, which thereby performs a ritual repetition of the first act of tribal cohesion. The myth also has the further implications of providing full legitimization of animal slaughter and of demonstrating the superiority of the egalitarian solidarity of age-mates, based on communal slaughter and meat eating, over the economic biological solidarity of the kinship group.

The equation of the name-oxen with the age-set and of cows with the kinship group also corresponds to other social and economic characteristics. During the wet season men stay with their families. The elementary family moves to the western pastures, leaving or joining camps as a single unit. The staple foods are milk and grain from the household's usually ample supply, and there are few age-mate contacts. At the beginning of the dry season the camps start moving towards the river, the milk supply drops to above minimum and the stock of grains is depleted. The men generally leave their camps and spend their time going from one meat-eating feast to the next while the little milk there is reserved for the women and children, thanks to the rule which proscribes the drinking of milk after having eaten roast meat. By making roast meat antithetical to milk this rule also stresses the differences between the kinship group, biological continuity, nursing and the mother-child relationship symbolised by milk, on the one hand,

and animal slaughter and ritual eating, lack of continuity and the strong age-mate relationship, all symbolised by roast meat, on the other.

Ritual communal eating by men strengthens their social relationships. The older a man gets, the more animals he slaughters, and his status and prestige are correspondingly enhanced. The greater his status and prestige, the more animals he is required to kill to meet the demands of being a 'big man'. Consequently, the older he gets and the more important, the fewer animals he has. The slaughter of animals does not, however, directly affect his and his household's daily milk supply, because as his own herd declines his children increase theirs, and milk is regarded as joint household property. The dry season, when the men live together, also offers them an opportunity of strengthening their social relationships through the exchange of oxen, ox-bells and mutual visits, so as to promote social intercourse and cohesion in a society not primarily based on agnatic ties.

Under the peculiar ecological conditions of Dassanetchland, which favour animal husbandry but offer insufficient pasture grounds, the killing of animals is essential. It may be conjectured that psychologically the mass slaughter described becomes feasible thanks to the emotional concentration on the name-oxen, the specific animals a man identifies with himself and his age-set. By this displacement mechanism the slaughter of other animals becomes devoid of any emotional charge, all feelings being invested exclusively in the name-ox. It is thus possible to understand the indifferent and mocking attitude assumed towards the huge number of animals killed in the *dimi* ceremony, which does not involve name-oxen and age-mate solidarity. Moreover, the possession of name-oxen coincides with the period when a man does most of his slaughtering. Contrary to the rule, he usually gets rid of his name-ox a few years after the *dimi* ceremony, towards the end of his forties or early fifties, when he is anyhow left with only a few cows and a bull.

At first sight it might seem that, like oxen, bulls are equated with men and with the age-set. Both bulls and oxen are male bovines. Oxen belong to a man's own age-set, bulls to the senior age-set. Both emphasize independence of the kinship group. Thus a man can acquire a bull only upon marriage, when he detaches himself from his immediate agnates. Likewise the choice of an ox of a different colour from that of his father's and from his own original name, taken from the colour of his father's name-ox, marks his maturity and gradual detachment from the kinship group. The *nyeleya* of the name-ox and the actual performance of the bull also indicate virility and male fertility. Again, when a man dies, both his oxen and his bulls are killed.

All these similarities, however, are merely superficial. Bulls are directly associated with kinship and continuity. It is through their mating with the cows that the herd's continuity as well as the milk supply are assured. Oxen are not essential in this respect and are therefore killed sooner or later. The idea that bulls do not die and are never killed embodies the continuity principle associated with kinship, whereas the oxen which are killed are identified with the age-set. A man, moreover, sets out by receiving cows and other female animals which are expressive of kinship continuity, for like him his sons will be receiving cows from him and so on. The inclusion of a bull in his herd is contingent upon a man taking a wife who has in the natural course of things received the blessing of the 'bulls', the representatives of the senior age-set and tribal bull-

owners, for her marriage¹³. That this blessing is conferred by the 'bulls' rather than by the kinship group is a further reminder that the growth of a married son's herd is no longer dependent on his father and that concurrently with intensive animal slaughter human fertility sets in upon marriage. A kind of exchange is effected here. The man, as it were, gives himself and his herd to his age-set. In return the senior age set, representing the highest echelon of the age-set organization, presents him with a bull so that his herd may increase, and blesses his wife so that his family may increase.

The age-set thus provides the basis for his social and economic continuity, his growing herd ultimately being taken over by his sons and assuring his subsistence as his own stock dwindles. As stated, the possession of name-oxen, which helps to discharge the emotional affects of animal slaughter, coincides with the period when the slaughter is at its peak. This is hardly consonant with the formal rule that only a man who has a married son can give up his name-oxen and that a man who has only daughters must hold on to his name-oxen until his death. A man who has a married son and no daughters or a young daughter still has relatively much stock left over and yet has to slaughter many animals until his herd is reduced to the size of that of a man who has nothing but daughters after the *dimi* ceremony has been accomplished. This apparent contradiction can be partly reconciled by the fact that in a patrilineal society having nothing but daughters implies absence of kinship continuity. The blessing conferred upon the daughters passes on to another group which they enrich with their fertility. Holding on to one's name-oxen until death is symbolic of this lack of continuity. A married son who is in possession of a bull, on the other hand, symbolises patrilineal continuity. Hence it is possible to dispense with the animal that stands for non-continuity and is identified with the age-set.

The matter must further be viewed in the light of the specific economic relationship between a father and his children and of ecological conditions. Having a name-ox involves extensive animal slaughter, and the occasional exchange of cows for oxen. Giving up one's name-oxen also implies a certain reduction in the extent of the obligatory slaughter. A person who has no male offspring is left with but little stock after the *dimi* ceremony and will be abandoned by his daughters when they grow up and go to live with their husbands. His future milk supply is uncertain since he has no sons on whose herds he can rely. Hence the chances are that he will kill as few of his herd as possible. He is likely to evade various rules and find excuses in order to spare his stock, especially since the rules requiring slaughter are not unequivocal and can often be manipulated. The rule by which he is required to keep his name-oxen until his death therefore serves the purpose of forcing a man who has a definite interest in sparing his herd to go on slaughtering it so as not to accumulate stock. Since he is thus obliged to go on decimating his herd he is compelled to enter into some sort of economic cooperation with someone else, usually his son-in-law. On the other hand a man who has a married son may also have been required to perform the *dimi* cere-

¹³ Upon the birth of her first child the mother braids part of her hair into a plait called *gut*, the same as a bull's sexual organ. A man, on the other hand, has four phallic protrusions on his head referred to as *oto*, resembling both in name and in number a cow's udders. This dual symbolic identification of the woman both with a bull and with cows and of the man with a cow and with oxen will be dealt with elsewhere.

mony because he may have had a younger daughter. He may also have had no daughters and therefore been exempted from this costly ceremony. In either case he is unlikely to evade the required animal slaughter because his future is assured by the fact that the oldest married son customarily stays with him until his death. The father can therefore kill practically his entire herd without fear of going hungry. If he has no stock left he may take some from his son, who may not be delighted but is in honour bound not to refuse. A man who has a married son living with him needs no name-oxen as an incentive to go on killing stock but does so anyhow.

VII

A Dassanetch starts out in life with a name referring to the colour of his father's name-ox, the name of a person with whom his father wished to be related or to some event that occurred to his father or mother about the time of his birth. Until he chooses his name-ox and the colour that forms the basis of his new name he is called exclusively by the name which links him with his father's household. The choice of his new name coincides with his budding independence and the gradual severance of his kinship ties, which is accomplished with his marriage when, unless he is the first-born, he leaves his father's home to establish his own household. Upon the birth of his first child he is also referred to as "the father of". The alternate use of his ox-name and his paternity-status name is indicative not only of the two types of solidarity relations he maintains at this time with his kinship group and his age-set, but also of the nature of his social relationships. The paternal status name shows that he is the head of an independent household. By this name he is called by some of his agnates, if they do not use the specific kinship appellation, as well as by some of his adult affines, especially those of his father-in-law's generation, persons with whom he has no close social relationship and women. This name by which he is generally addressed by adult affines also indicates the special relationship of wife-givers to the wife-receiver as the father of a child, implying the beginning of the bridewealth transfer and stressing their rights over his livestock. The kinship relation or social distance of the people using this name are such as to require a measure of formality and obedience due to precedence, superiority or mutual respect.

The ox-name, on the other hand, is used to denote an attitude of familiarity among coevals. This is the name used by age-mates, bond-partners and affines of the same generation with whom there is a close relationship based on reciprocal exchange. With the successive killing of name-oxen, each with special markings and different shadings and colour combinations, additional appellations are constantly added which only those who have taken part in the ritual eating of the particular name-ox are privileged to use. These variations reflect the dynamics and intensity of the social and economic relations based on exchange between coevals. The ox-names serve as a code to the type of proximity and exchange between any two individuals within the ramified network created by what EVANS-PRITCHARD (1934: 628) calls "the technique of economic relations". By giving up his herd of name-oxen and their slaughter a man retires from intensive economic activity, and by the time he becomes an elder he is generally called after the basic

colour of his ox-name, which is the same as that of his first favourite personal-ox, as well as by his paternal status name. The first is indicative of respect and marks his status as an elder among his immediate age-mates who, like him, have retired from the game of constant economic interchange. However, an increasing number of people who are close to him use his father-status name, often to the exclusion of his ox-name, rather than referring to his position in the generational continuum. This appellation is indicative of the interdependence of the elder who has little livestock left and his son with his growing herd, who together constitute one household. Unlike the Nuer who refer to older people as "the son of" (EVANS-PRITCHARD 1948: 170), the Dassanetch call them exclusively after their oldest son who stays with them after marriage until they die. This mutual dependence is stressed at the expense of continuity to the extent that a person's name is not a point in lineage structure and no-one carries on his name after his death.

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