

The Elephant Men

by Roger Gomm.

The Waliangulu are a hunter-gatherer tribe of South Kenya. They are specialists in hunting elephants which they have probably done for thousands of years and in which they have predictably become extraordinarily proficient. Recently, however, for various commercial motives, their life has been seriously interfered with, with predictably disruptive effects on both their society and elephant populations.



Illustration by D.W.R. Mewton

The setting is the arid hinterland of the Kenya coast. Here 20-40 miles inland, remnants of the coastal forests give way to plains of thorn bush and open grassland which stretch inland to the foothills of the Kenya Highlands. This vast area is aptly named the "Nyika" or wilderness and stretches with unrelenting monotony southwards into Tanzania and northwards to grade into the deserts of Somalia, Ethiopia and Northern Kenya. Like many semi-arid regions with unreliable rainfall the ecosystem here is delicately balanced and over the past 100 years or so has been in a state of flux, wavering from dense thorn forest through open grassland to semi-desert and back again. Human factors have played a part in the ecology of the region out of all proportion to human population densities.

One hundred years ago the lords of the land were still the Oromo Galla: Hamitic tribesmen who had swept down from the north in the seventeenth century alternately besieging and trading with the Arab statelets along the Coast and with the Arab or Portuguese rulers of Mombasa and displacing Bantu cultivators like the Pokomo, the Giriama and the Duruma. The Galla pastoralists grazed their herds of Borana cattle, camels, sheep and goats across the wilderness, retreating to dry season settlements in the forests along the coast and along the major rivers and especially along the Tana River and the lower Galana and in the coastal region between.

Living among the Galla were a hunting and gathering people called variously, the *Waliangulu*, *Ariangulu*, or *Wasania*. But these are the names of other tribes for these people. They call themselves *Watta*. I shall refer to them as *Waliangulu* simply because this is the name which most frequently appears in published references to them.

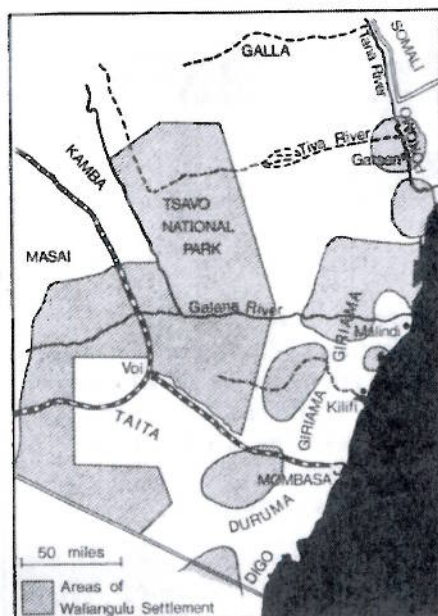
Like other peoples calling themselves *Watta* or *Wat* living among Hamitic Pastoralists or Amharic cultivators in Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia the *Waliangulu* were helots, a subject people to their cattle-keeping overlords. The exact nature of the relations between the Galla and the *Waliangulu* are lost in time but it seems that a patron and client relationship of tribute and service and reciprocal obligations existed between clans of *Waliangulu* and clans of Galla. Among the obliga-

tions of the Waliangulu was the payment of tribute in ivory tusks, and in honey and beeswax, presented in small carved wooden barrels. The Waliangulu also played an important part in the funeral ceremonies of the Galla—a common role in Africa for a subject and despised people.

It is something of a mystery as to what advantages accrued to the Waliangulu from their thralldom. We know that cloth (obtained by the Galla from the Coastal Tribes) was given to the Waliangulu on certain ceremonial occasions and it is possible that the Waliangulu received cattle products. It is difficult to imagine that the subservient position of the Waliangulu could have been maintained if the Waliangulu had not colluded in it. However one group of Waliangulu obviously found the Galla yoke too irksome, for according to their oral tradition they moved south to the Taru desert in the 1880s or '90s to escape the Galla.

Tribute in ivory is important. It has been suggested that one tusk of each elephant killed by a Waliangulu hunter was the rightful property of a Galla and although this obligation would have been easy enough to avoid it seems certain that a significant proportion of the very large quantities of ivory exported from this coast in the nineteenth century came from Waliangulu hunters via the Galla. The ivory from this part of Kenya is of a soft variety, highly prized in India, for the best Indian carvings are in African ivory, and especially prized were the long straight tusks suitable for walking sticks. Likewise, rhino horn, beeswax and honey would have found a ready market for export on the coast and featured in the nineteenth century landings of Arab dhows.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century the Galla hold on the area weakened and the Galla retrenched northwards. Their cattle were a tempting prize for the Kamba and the Masai to the west and the Somali to the east coveted their grazing lands as well as their cattle. From the coast the Arab-Swahili statelets mounted campaigns against the Galla which reached their fiercest at this time. However disease and ecological factors probably played a more important part in breaking the Galla hegemony than did political factors. Successive waves of rinderpest and bovine pleuropneumonia decimated



their cattle; the source of their livelihood and the basis of their social organisation.

The most severe of these plagues seems to have been the rinderpest epidemic associated with the Italian campaign in Somalia in 1887, which spread into Africa from the Horn along the major routes of cattle-trading and cattle-raiding. It spread from the Somali to the Galla, and from the Galla to the Kamba and Masai, reaching Masailand with raided cattle in 1889. Cattle losses to disease intensified cattle-raiding and increased raiding no doubt increased the risk of inter-tribal infection. The Galla seem to have been the major losers, although the same factors helped to break the power of the Masai.

Some ecologists would argue that the dice were already loaded against the Kenya Galla; that over-grazing in the Nyika and a regime of annual burning for a green-bite, had reduced the area to one of semi-desert with a reduced carrying capacity for cattle.

The full story of the interaction of ecological and political factors is obviously complicated and has yet to be told in full; but after the 1911 pleuropneumonia epidemic there were few Galla herds left south of the Tiva River. Most of the pastoral Galla had moved north although some, now without cattle, became assimilated to their erstwhile helots, the Waliangulu.

An important consequence of the presence of the Galla had been that the whole of the Nyika and vast tracts

of the coastal forests had been closed to cultivators. During the nineteenth century those Bantu tribes who were not subjected to the Galla were concentrated around fortified settlements near the coast and the forest was preserved from axe and hoe. Forest and Nyika formed one unified ecosystem not only for pastoralists and hunters but for the wildlife which travelled between forest and wilderness with the changing of the seasons. With the decline of the Galla, the Bantu cultivators spread voraciously through the forests, felling and burning the trees and planting their fields of sorghum and maize, and where conditions permitted, tree-crops of coconut, mangoes, and later kapok and cashew. The process continues today with cultivation spreading into ever more arid areas. Once extensive semi-deciduous forest is now represented only by remnants, and the once rich fauna has been replaced with dwarf cattle and goats, the latter exercising their tremendous potential for destroying woody vegetation.

The Waliangulu meanwhile found other outlets for their hunters' products, and ivory and rhino horn continued to reach the coast as before. They also found their services demanded as magicians and herbalists.

One of the characteristics of the Waliangulu on which almost every observer has remarked is their chameleon-like nature, their ability to appear to become completely assimilated to their neighbours. Thus the Waliangulu took over styles of housing, patterns of agriculture, cattle and goat husbandry and palm-wine drinking from their neighbours and they became bilingual adding a Bantu language to Watta and later adding Swahili. But they did all this without quite losing their identity as a separate people, for the heart of Waliangulu culture was elephant hunting.

The Waliangulu were not merely hunters, they were highly specialised hunters. They seem to have had little interest in hunting anything but elephants, except perhaps rhinos. Their language is rich in terms for elephants in different stages of development, and makes it possible to distinguish with great accuracy between different individuals and different types of tusk and different tracks. The Waliangulu bow is an enormously powerful affair with a pull exceeding 100 lbs, far more

powerful than other African bows, and a great contrast to the usual small bow of East and Central Africa. The arrows with detachable foreshafts carry a huge dose of acacantha poison, and the bow is used at close range, its enormous power penetrating elephant hide easily. Tribute to Waliangulu bushcraft and tracking skills has been paid by all those who have observed them in action.

One can imagine that Waliangulu hunters always took a heavy toll of elephant. In the wet season they were on the move in small family groups, killing, camping by the carcass, and then moving on. In the dry season when elephants concentrated around scarce watering points, hunting was easier and the Waliangulu lived in larger groups and performed their tribal ceremony of initiation; the *forforikian*. When elephants were plentiful only the choicest cuts of meat and the entrails were consumed and there would have been little incentive to preserve meat for future use. Like the elephant itself the Waliangulu were wasteful feeders. Such a pattern of life could easily have accounted for a kill of 1,000 elephants a year for a Waliangulu population of 600 (my estimate of the current population in traditional areas). Evidence suggests that the Waliangulu were once much more numerous.

Until 1948 the Nyika was, to the British administration, an empty area devoid of interest except to White Hunters; a barrier to be crossed as quickly as possible on the route from the coast to the White Highlands. The Waliangulu attracted only the interest of a few administrators and travellers with an ethnographic bent. But when in 1948 some 8,000 square miles were arbitrarily marked out as Tsavo National Park the Waliangulu became of immediate interest as their hunting way of life became illegal overnight.

Preliminary surveys showed that hundreds if not thousands of elephant were being killed all over the Nyika, both within and without the National Park and especially along the Galana River. And it was not merely elephant; leopard, rhino, lion, buffalo, giraffe, and buck were being slaughtered in numbers which staggered those who had to establish the new park. The National Park warden and the Game Department began a dedicated campaign of investigation and arrest.

The story of the anti-poaching cam-

paign has been vividly told in Dennis Holman's book *The Elephant People* (John Murrey 1967), and I do not propose to retell it in detail here. The combined efforts of the Game Department, the National Parks staff and the Police uncovered an intricate underground network of contacts, reaching from the hunters in the bush through middlemen to Asian traders on the coast: a network which carried money, arrow-poison and palm wine into the bush and ivory, rhino horn, skins, furs, meat and other game products to Mombasa. The anti-poachers also discovered thousands of dry-season hunting camps along the Galana and elsewhere, and thousands of tuskless elephant carcasses—all this an anathema to men whose brief was conservation.



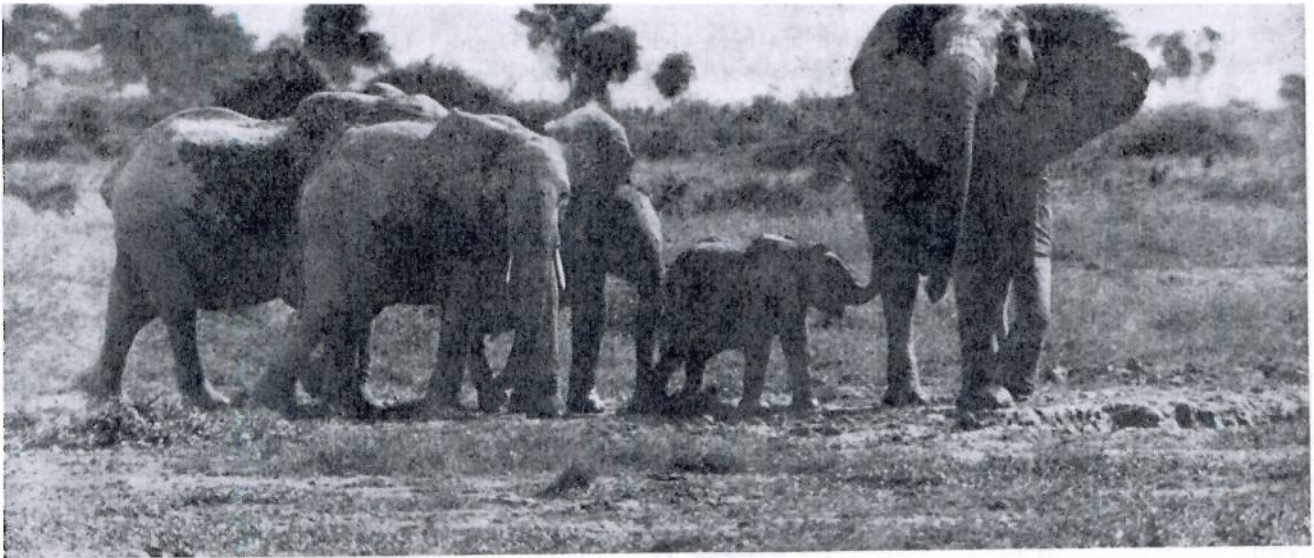
To the anti-poachers there appeared to have been a recent radical change in native hunting activities in the Nyika, and so to a certain extent there had been. There is no doubt that the market for ivory and other game products was at its peak and that hunting activities were more intense and the marketing infra-structure better developed at this time. One mistake of the anti-poaching brigade however was its conclusion that increased poaching could be attributed largely to an increase in the hunting activities of the Waliangulu. It is probably true that Waliangulu were killing more elephant than traditionally, and that their hunting activities had become more orientated towards killing for ivory for sale. However the Game Department's own evidence suggests that the significant increase in poaching was not due to Waliangulu, but to members of other tribes who were not traditional hunters and who had begun to exploit the Nyika. The Waliangulu hunted little except for elephant and some rhino. The animal whose survival was most threatened was the leopard, largely a victim of Kamba hunters. Again one of the most serious threats

to wildlife were poachers who used snares and traps, men of almost every tribe except the Waliangulu. Even in their traditional pursuit of hunting elephant, the Waliangulu were joined by numbers of Giriama and Kamba, often indifferent hunters whose ineffectual shots caused great pain and suffering to the wounded prey. It seems that having met the Waliangulu, the anti-poaching brigade became so mesmerised by their skill and prowess as elephant hunters that the "poaching problem" became defined as the "Waliangulu problem". Moreover almost every Waliangulu male was a hunter, they lived on the spot, and they could be more easily prosecuted than migrant hunters from other tribes. The natural pride of the Waliangulu in their personal hunting exploits and their natural honesty led them to convict themselves out of their own mouths.

For an anthropologist the anti-poaching campaign had a sinister look, for it was an exercise in forensic anthropology directed against the interests of the people themselves. Genealogies and details of social relationships were collected and tabulated so that contacts could be traced along kinship links and so that the psychological shock of apparent omniscience could be used in interrogation. The personal marks made by hunters on their arrows were collected and filed in order to identify carcasses and abandoned hunting camps. Interpersonal grievances were exploited to gain information. In addition, midnight swoops, paid informants, and psychological tricks of interrogation were used. As an anti-poaching campaign it was highly successful.

It was also a highly successful exercise in ethnocide; the anti-poaching campaign destroyed Waliangulu society and culture. One index of this was the wave of homicides which accompanied the campaign as the relatives of those imprisoned took vengeance on informers. By 1957 some 400 Waliangulu were in prison with hard labour; almost three-fifths of the adult males of the tribe.

The supreme irony of the whole affair came when it was realised that elephant populations were rapidly increasing inside and around the park and were constituting a serious threat to the whole ecology of the region. Indeed it was suggested first that 2,500 and then that 5,000 elephant be shot in



one crash kill to cut back the elephant population explosion. Crash kills were never carried out because of the National Parks Ordinance which forbids the slaughter of animals in a conservation area. Set against an annual poachers' bag of perhaps 2,000 elephants, suggestions of crash kills of 5,000 make one wonder what the anti-poaching campaign was all about.

When in 1958 the majority of Waliangulu were released from prison, many did not return to the bush. They went instead to Voi or Mariakani or Mombasa where they still loaf around the *hotelis* making a living by odd-jobbing or theft. Those who returned to their settlements were bitter and forlorn. They saw elephant-hunting as denied to them but permitted to white men who could afford a licence. They were suspicious of their neighbours, hostile to those whom they suspected of having informed against them, angry with those who had taken their wives while they were in jail.

Meanwhile in some settlements they were kept under constant watch by the Game Department. Those who returned to hunting were quickly arrested and sent to prison again.

The answer to the new elephant and Waliangulu problem seemed to lie in the proposals of the Galana River Game Management Scheme—a scheme to harvest surplus elephants, manned by the Waliangulu themselves, under the strict supervision of the Game Department. In theory the scheme would have served various ends; the rehabilitation of the Waliangulu released from jail, the provision of a legitimate income from ivory and other game products, and the possibility of regulating elephant populations on a

scientific basis.

The scheme was mainly concerned with elephant. An area of 2,000 square miles was set aside North of the Galana River. Although the annual quota of 200 was less than a quarter of the Waliangulu kill prior to the anti-poaching campaign the prices on the legitimate market would have been far higher than the two shillings a pound obtained on the black market, and in addition the meat was to be marketed.

The Game Department looked on the scheme with great enthusiasm. The Waliangulu were less enthusiastic. Having been rounded up and jailed once for practising what was to them their legitimate way of life, they were suspicious that this was a trick by the government to get them back to jail again. It is possible that this barrier might have been overcome had it not been for other features of the scheme.

The Waliangulu objected to being told how, when and where to kill elephant. They were after all more proficient and experienced than those who were to supervise them. The elephant were to be shot with guns; weapons which the Waliangulu held in low esteem compared with the big bow. Some of the best hunters refused to participate when they learnt this, and those who learned to use a gun were often indifferent shots. The marketing of the products of the scheme were placed outside of the control of the Waliangulu hunters. The Government insisted that the proceeds from the sale of meat and ivory should go into general revenue and that Government would allocate an approximately equivalent amount to the scheme. This meant that Waliangulu hunters were to be paid for their kills up to 12 months

after making them, an arrangement hardly designed to gain their confidence in the first year. Worse, since almost no provision was made for transporting meat, little reached the market and the scheme relied almost entirely on the sale of ivory.

The design of the scheme invalidated Waliangulu bushcraft bowmanship and autonomy. It separated action from reward by months and allowed the Waliangulu no control over marketing. It was inadequately equipped. Given that the scheme followed an intensive persecution of the tribe it is not surprising that the scheme flopped. In the first year the target of 200 elephant killed under the terms of the scheme was not attained, while elephants continued to be killed illegally and the poachers arrested and sentenced to hard labour—although poaching never reached the levels of before the anti-poaching campaign.

By the end of the second year the elephants killed under the terms of the scheme were killed by paid employees of the Game Department, including paid Waliangulu. However even this small measure of Waliangulu participation was whittled down over the next two years as the Game Department dismissed Waliangulu for unreliability and drunkenness. The elephants themselves set the final seal on the debacle by abandoning the area of the scheme for the safety of the Tsavo National Park. The use of guns in the scheme seems to have been important here, confirming Waliangulu wisdom on suitable weaponry.

By 1965 such work that was done within the scheme was indistinguishable from the elephant control work done by the Game Department on the bound-

aries of settled areas and in 1967 the rights of elephant hunting were transferred to a private company which has begun to develop the area as pasture for Borana cattle—a throwback to 60 years ago.

The Waliangulu themselves are now a dispirited and suspicious people. Those who still live in traditional areas eke out a living from maize cultivation, goats and dwarf cattle, in areas markedly unsuitable for agriculture. They gain casual employment as trackers and camp servants for white hunters. They cut charcoal in regions where the trees are already threatened and where it takes several acres of thorn bush to make a few bags. A large proportion of the cash from charcoal is spent on palm wine, just as was the money from illicit ivory, and the lorries which come to take the charcoal away bring palm wine in 40 gallon drums—enough to reduce a community to a state of paralysis for two days and nights. A few Waliangulu continue poaching and from time to time are arrested and go back to prison. Waliangulu communities, situated as they are on the fringes of inhabited territory, have become natural hideouts for

criminals and the Government constantly toys with the idea of resettling them nearer to asphalted roads.

The tragedy is that Waliangulu culture has been both destroyed and placed beyond investigation, for having been persecuted through applied anthropology they now politely but firmly refuse to answer any questions bearing on their social organisation.

With the elephant hunters inactive, elephant populations have grown to crisis levels. In the Tsavo area hunting seems to have been the main factor in controlling elephant populations until recently. It appears from empirical evidence that with limited hunting, elephant populations are capable of increasing at rates of 8 to 10 per cent per year. Elephants consume about 4 cwt of vegetable matter a day, picking and choosing over a large area, damaging more than they consume. When leaves or fruit are too high for comfort the elephant simply rips off the branches or pushes the tree over. When eating grass, huge clumps are pulled up by the roots and often discarded half-eaten. Serious damage is done to trees by elephants scratching themselves on the bark to dislodge ticks, and by

barking trees to obtain moisture, which makes otherwise fire-resistant trees susceptible to fire-damage during the dry-season.

The interaction between fire and overpopulation by elephants has now reached a new and more sinister stage—turning grassland into desert, thereby threatening other species of wildlife. In addition hundreds of elephants perish in the dry-season from starvation and thirst.

The crash-kill is still talked about, but the National Parks Ordinance still holds for Tsavo and with the Kenyan economy heavily reliant on tourism there is strong political resistance to reducing elephant herds to levels where they would have to be searched for by safari parties.

It is easy to be wise in hindsight and to see that human hunting activities were an essential regulating component of the Nyika ecosystem. Far from "hunting themselves out of existence" as one conservationist put it, the role of the Waliangulu appears to have been that of preventing the elephant from eating itself and other species out of existence.

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