



The road to Korr

Ongoing droughts and escalating violence are threatening the way of life of Northern Kenya's pastoral nomads. The BOMA Fund, a grassroots organization, is dedicated to giving them the skills they need to survive.

by Kathleen Colson & Peter Maloney
photographs by Kathleen Colson

Last February, I traveled to the remote village of Korr in Northern Kenya. My first trip to the region had been more than three decades earlier, when I was an exchange student at the University of Nairobi.

During my 25 years of doing business in Africa, I had gone back from time to time, but had grown increasingly alarmed at the devastation caused by an ongoing series of droughts. Life has always been a struggle for the rural people of Northern Kenya, and it has become much more so in recent years.

In 2005, I decided to start my own non-profit organization called the BOMA Fund, in order to help women in these pastoral, nomadic communities earn an income that would enable them to feed their families and educate their children. Now I was returning to Korr to observe a ceremony I hoped would mark the beginning of a new life for 200

poor, but hard-working and highly-motivated women. The women had just completed a course in business skills training through BOMA's Rural Entrepreneur Access Project (REAP).

As indigenous residents of one of the most desolate regions in Africa, these women and their families have long known deprivation beyond the imagination of most Westerners. With barely enough pasturage and water to sustain their cattle, they live at a subsistence level in the best of times. The prolonged droughts in recent years have made even that tenuous existence more challenging. There is a growing concern that the ethnic tensions in Northern Kenya, exacerbated by dramatic climate change, could make it the next Darfur.

Over the last decade, there has been a huge influx of guns into the area and



On This page: ▲Top: Village in the Kasuu, ►Bottom Right: Team BOMA and scouts ▼Bottom: Khatakhadan camel butchers
 On Next page: ►Main photo: Malaiwan Lejale, who began her own food business with the help of BOMA Fund

villagers must be ever watchful for armed raiding parties seeking to steal their cattle. Villages are vulnerable whenever the men are away for extended periods in search of water and forage for their cattle. That often leaves villages with only unarmed women, children and old people, who can offer little resistance. There is also a growing threat of sectarian violence as Al Shaabab, a militant Muslim group, looks to broaden its influence in the region.



For this reason, I travel with an armed bodyguard whenever I visit rural areas. On this occasion, my companions included two men with whom I have shared many an arduous journey. Our driver, Ahmed Omar, is BOMA's operations director and someone without whom BOMA could not exist. Nicknamed "Kura" —Swahili for "vote" — he is widely respected for his integrity and his courage. Our bodyguard, Semeji, carried an AK47 for protection against cattle raiders and bandits. In the past, his AK had also proved useful in scaring off curious hyenas.



After our night crossing of the Kasuit desert, we arrived in Korr at about four in the morning, awakening many, who — unable to sleep in the sweltering heat — had dragged their mattresses outside. After a brief splash of water in the bathhouse and an all-too-close encounter with a deadly black mamba, I dropped off to sleep in my hut serenaded by the chanting of warriors in the distance.

The Ceremony

When I awoke, the village was buzzing with excited chatter as people gathered for the big event. In addition to the 200 women receiving their certificates, attendees included tribal elders, local businessmen, relatives and curious onlookers, as well as the District Officer George Ogama, a distant relative of US President Barack Obama.

Among the speakers that day was Abdi Amin, the most successful businessman in the village, whose story of how he started his own business with only 10,000 shillings was of great interest to our new entrepreneurs. Of even greater interest was his dire warning against giving credit, which he called "the graveyard of all businesses."

Following his speech, BOMA's trained Business Mentors John Galgithale and Adhar Amin did something that no one has ever done in this remote, neglected part of Africa — they gave money to poor people so they could start their own businesses.

As the meeting drew to a close, District Officer Ogama pointed out that, "This is the first time an organization has come to our village and given people what they asked for — money to start a business, and training and support so that they can succeed. They



didn't ask for an ID card, or what political party you belong to. They just asked if you would be willing to work hard and not give credit. The people who support BOMA in the US should know that they have given us what we need the most."

His words meant a great deal to me, because they validated what I believe is the fundamental strength of BOMA — our commitment to listening and to including local people in the planning and the leadership of programs. That's why our project REAP, which trained and funded the 200 fledgling businesswomen in Korr that day, has become an innovative model of how to alleviate poverty in remote areas of rural Africa.

Since that day last February, a growing number of people have learned of the



“ ... I travel with an armed bodyguard whenever I visit rural areas ... ”

On Left page: ◀ Top: Korr town business
On this page: ▲ Top Most: Bakery group
▲ Top: Bread from bakery group

difference that REAP is making in Northern Kenya. At a recent REAP training session in Korr, over 300 people turned out to observe the proceedings. In many places throughout the region, REAP events have broken attendance records formerly seen only at political rallies. Perhaps the reason for that can best be expressed by someone like Guthaso Guyo, a mother of seven from Korr, who told us: "This is the only practical program we have seen. This money was a small amount, but it has had a big impact on our community. It has made people wake up and work hard. And now they are proud of who they are." *h*



BOMA: Another word for hope. As the founder of the BOMA Fund, I'm often asked what BOMA means. I explain that it's a Swahili word for a type of cattle enclosure found in pastoral villages like

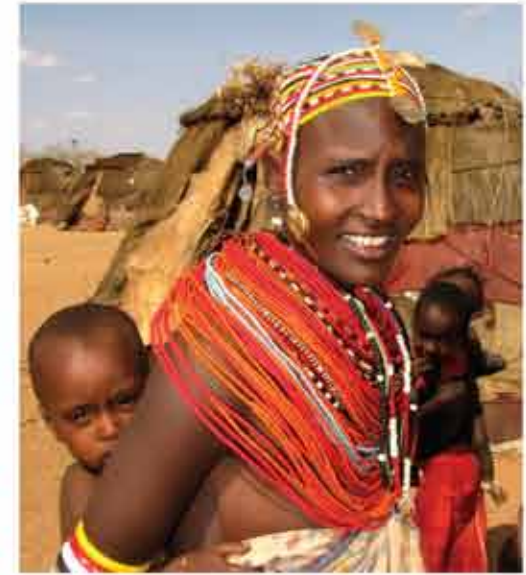


those in Northern Kenya. When used as a verb, it also means, "to fortify." But for people like Malawan Lejale, it has become another word for hope.

When Malawan's family lost their livestock, she feared she'd be unable to feed her eight children. So when she heard that the BOMA Fund provided business training and funding that enabled women to start their own businesses, she seized the opportunity to help her family. Now she has a business with four other women selling food to neighbors in her village and to visiting nomads. Above all, she has hope for her children's future.

The BOMA Fund is a grassroots organization with a single purpose – to improve the capacity of individuals to earn an income in Northern Kenya. Toward that end, we provide business training, seed capital and two years of mentoring by local business leaders. One of our key principles is that all our programs are to be led by local people. In the past year we launched 225 businesses in seven settled villages and over 50 nomadic villages. Each business supports not only those who run it, but 25 additional dependents as well.

Tom Peters, the author of "In Search of Excellence" and one of our staunchest supporters, gave us a welcome endorsement in our October 2009 newsletter. He noted that he supported only philanthropic efforts whose funds end up "on the ground" and benefit local efforts that foster entrepreneurialism and self-sufficiency. He concluded by saying: "The BOMA Fund scores the very highest marks on all the dimensions that are most important to me."



On Left page: ◀ Main photo: Halhalo
 On this page: ▲ Top Most: Malawan Lejale
 ▲ Top Centre: Mama Runggu in Kirkaum
 ▲ Top: Mama Runggu in Gooob Barmin

For more information on BOMA Fund, visit our website at www.bomafund.org.