Anthropologist Wilhelm Östberg spent two and a half years living among the Marakwet in the 1970s and has visited periodically since then. He describes life in the Kerio Valley then and now.

We visited the lowlands some four to five times a year and stayed for about two weeks on each occasion. For two and a half years we were engaged in anthropological research in the highland part of Marakwet in the Rift Valley, while also having a comparative study going in the lowlands. The contrast to the Marakwet highlands, where we lived with our two young children, was extraordinary. The highlands were lush, extensively cultivated, market oriented. As we descended the steep escarpment, the car bouncing with screeching brakes over rocks and through narrow passages, we arrived to heat, stillness, thorn bushes, acacias, cicadas, termite mounds, dik-diks, and a much slower pace of life.

Wilhelm Östberg
Tot, the main centre in the valley, was in the 1970s a sleepy place with a chief’s office, a police station, an understocked health centre, two churches, a few shops and a kilapuu, a club where locally-made beer was sold from drums — when I now go through my old diaries I am surprised to read how common it was that men were drunk a lot of the time. It has passed from my memory, but it is there in the notebooks. The government eventually banned the kilapuu [pl.]: certainly a wise move. The kilapuu at Tot was owned by the senior chief so ironically the government’s representative had to close down his best source of income.

In the valley our car was usually the only vehicle on the road. Women wore skin capes, livestock moved freely, and children were playing in the streams that descend the escarpment. The market places in the small valley centres were emblematic of picture-book Africa: light filtering through the foliage of big shade trees, women in fine jewellery, smoke from fires where cassava and tea were being prepared. Highland and lowland produce were bartered. Pokot women from across the Kerio River brought soured milk in gourds and Marakwet women offered millet, cassava, tomatoes, pawpaw, mangoes and bananas. There was honey, tobacco and snuff, but also winnowing plates, stools, cowrie shells, blacksmith products. Sorghum beer was sold on the outskirts of the markets. There were a few peddlers, but on the whole the trade was local. Elderly women addressed us in whispering voices, wishing us well: Changai changai gogonyuan (“Greetings, my grandchild”), Iyomunee (“How are you doing?”). We bought fruit, and talked to people who seemed to have all the time in the world for us.

I recall once when two elderly women asked us for a lift. They closed their eyes and held each other’s hands. When I asked if they were okay, they answered, “We do not know if we shall die now”.

The banana gardens were a pleasant contrast to the dry lands. The soil was moist, irrigation water passed slowly in the furrows, and a light breeze swayed the large banana fronds. The fields on the hillsides showed as green patches in a greyish-brown landscape. Shiny goats. It appeared an Eden, and in some ways it was. But there was, of course, also poverty, poor health services, few schools, and landslides.

Today life in the valley has all changed, and yet it has not. There is electricity in Tot centre. Two streets with well-stocked shops, regular matatu minivan transport to both Kapsowar and Biretwo and onwards to Eldoret and Kabarnet. Cell phones and the M-Pesa money service, rectangular houses, TV sets and motorbikes. There are two secondary schools. In the 70s young people had to climb the escarpment to the boarding schools in the highlands to get a secondary education.

The churches were prominent in village life then and they remain so today. The Marakwet look upon church and school as gateways to an improved life, and both are associated with progress and development. Today traditional socialisation processes have to no small extent been replaced. In 1973 American missionaries drove a small group of girls who were to be circumcised...
in Chesegon out of the district. Their intervention led to strong reactions. The district administration was alerted, and in the end the missionaries were reportedly asked to leave the country. Today, by contrast, local leaders are actively campaigning against female genital mutilation and advocate alternative forms of initiation.¹

Looking back at the Tot area as it was 40 years ago provides a measure of the changes in an outlying part of the country — less dramatic in course than the total re-shaping of Nairobi and other major cities, but nevertheless a parallel trajectory of changing conditions of life in Kenya and equally significant changes in the country.

Nowadays the road through the valley has improved but is still miserable when it rains. It is the major hindrance to exporting grain, vegetables and fruit from the area. A permanent road has been promised for decades, and is listed in the new County Development Plan, but has yet to materialise. Farmers cannot sell the prime mangoes they produce, and are paid low prices for those they do because of the costs traders have to incur to get the produce out of the valley.

What has not changed in 40 years is the feeling of relief, of exhaling, on arriving in the valley. Stretching the legs after the long drive, one’s eyes follow the glossy superb starlings, the bird the Marakwet say wears a ceremonial apron. And there, the voice of the dull-coloured honeyguide, leading people to honey, so important as it produces the mead that lubricates all ceremonies in Marakwet. The Cherangany range in the west is veiled in cloud; the east shows immense open areas with scattered hills here and there. My ears catch the sound of hoes working the soil, leading me to people. Greetings are exchanged. I say that I used to move in the area with Kassagam some years back. “Oh yes, of course, but you have grown old” and “How is the family?” I meet an old man on his way back from the kano, the goats’ enclosure further out on the plains, a red blanket over his shoulders, a battered slouch-hat, shoes made from old tyres. We exchange greetings and come to

realise that we both had roles at a wedding for a teacher at Chesongoch some years back. He had led the blessings while I took the wedding photographs. We talk about people we both know.

I still have miles to go before I reach Tot, my destination, where work awaits, but I needed this brief stop to know that I have arrived and to take a first walk along paths criss-crossing each other between fields and irrigation furrows: the serenity of the landscape, the heat, the insects humming. Now I am ready for the meetings at Tot: interviews, questionnaires, tracking people, requests, and *emoo* — the friendly talk between people who have not met for some time and who update each other on what has happened since then. I walk back to my vehicle and proceed to Tot.

The irrigation complex

Fields are cultivated today with the same implements and in much the same way as in the 70s, as industrially-produced hoes and machetes were already commonplace then. Most families owned two to three machetes, two to four hoes and an axe. All farm work was done by hand, as it still is today. In the 70s men irrigated the land by moving water with the help of long-shafted hoes to all corners of the field. Today women have also taken on this activity, but the work on the canals remains a male preoccupation.

The most remarkable feature of the area, the pre-colonial irrigation complex, is managed essentially in the same way as it has been for 300 years. This is an exceptional record by any account, but particularly so given the considerable problems with salinisation of soils and misappropriated funds that plague contemporary irrigation schemes.

It is a tricky operation to take water out of the rivers that hurl themselves down the precipitous escarpment, from the Cherangany Hills down into the Kerio Valley more than 1,000 metres below. Water is led through headworks, dams and sluices into kilometre upon kilometre of canals, carefully levelled and embanked along the escarpment face and utilising, where necessary, aqueducts made of hollow tree-trunks and shelves supported by wooden scaffolding along almost vertical cliffs, eventually to reach the valley and to irrigate the fields. The canals are constructed and their path defined by rocks, boulders, logs and brushwood, reinforced by soil and grass. In the early 70s concrete and plastic pipes were important additions in difficult places, and today such enhancements are extensive. However, it is still local knowledge and in places local materials that keep the water running. The statistics are staggering: along a stretch of about 40 kilometres of the escarpment, there are 91 main canals totalling 315 kilometres. Several accounts describing various aspects of the spectacular irrigation system are available, including its physical layout, history, labour organisation, water distribution, gender issues, rules, and practices.

My colleague Johnstone Kibor Kassagam, and at times also Andrew Kite arap Cheptum, and I used to join people maintaining the canals or working on new extensions, and spent long hours recording the histories of the different canals. We also interacted with people from development agencies who were eager to rescue a system they considered on the verge of collapse — trying to influence that they did not, with their zeal and money, kill the social dynamics that kept the system running. We sat in at meetings where maintenance and repairs were planned, where water was divided between different kin groups, or where water thefts were sorted out.

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2 Davies, Kipruto and Moore (2014:492).
3 for references see Davies, Kipruto and Moore (2014); Östberg (2014).
It is in these ever-recurrent meetings that the key to both the origin of the canals and their remarkable resilience lies.\textsuperscript{4} The Marakwet mode of organising labour, arranging a marriage ceremony, clearing new land, resolving a conflict, putting up defences against raiders — they all follow the same pattern. Whether enlisting the cooperation of a handful of people or of 50 or 200, the same procedure is followed. People meet and discuss. No chairman or judge is appointed. Elders and young men take their positions, and people reason. They listen to evidence, they compare the case with previous cases, they quote proverbs, they recount particular events and again they reason. This mode of organising and taking decisions is useful in solving small, everyday problems, but it also allows the possibility of deciding on grand schemes like constructing a new irrigation canal.

The decision-making pattern is the same for a neighbourhood, for a village, for an area. The extraordinary achievement of leading water down the steep escarpment does not require a centralised political body or a dominant class or elaborate planning charts. And it is this very same procedure that has allowed the system to survive and continue to expand. The pre-colonial irrigation system is still expanding. Since the 1980s no less than 30 new canals have been constructed.\textsuperscript{5}

But the water in the canals does not run by gravity alone. Water is perceived as given by Ilat, the spirit of lightning, thunder and rain. The irrigation canals are part of the farming system, but they are also metaphysically charged arteries flowing through the Marakwet landscape. Traditionally people found it safe not to cultivate land near rivers

\textsuperscript{4} Östberg (2004).

\textsuperscript{5} Davies, Kipruto and Moore (2014:518).
so as not to annoy Iilat. He might disappear, which would mean that the rains would stop. We listened to accounts of how women must be careful when passing waterways so that they are not snatched by Iilat, who is reported to have a very special liking for young women. If they wear leketyo, the belt decorated with cowrie shells (associated with water and fertility, among other things), they had better remove it so that Iilat is not unnecessarily attracted.

A group of elders at Kabakire village, near Tot, entered into a discussion on whether all iiloot [pl.] are male or not. They recalled accounts by people who have observed iiloot in rivers, and concluded that women’s snuffboxes, earrings and other objects had been snatched by female iiloot. They remembered an incident when a leketyo was lost in the river. A sheep was sacrificed and Iilat asked to return it. The following morning the belt decorated with cowrie shells was found close to the “House of Iilat”, situated where the Kapiisyiyo canal is led off from River Embobut. They concluded that it was a female iilat that had taken the belt. And then they proceeded to discuss different people who had fought with male iiloot and lost.

Children learn in school that lightning and thunder are electric discharges. This does not quite block the idea that rains are visits by Iilat. The spirits of lightning constitute a meaningful reality to the many Marakwet who volunteered stories about iiloot when we interviewed them about the irrigation canals. The message was that people should behave well so that Iilat continues to provide rain and the irrigation water on which they all depend.

Livelihoods

The Tot area, and the Marakwet part of the Kerio Valley more generally, was in the mid-70s an area of some agricultural potential, as it still is today. Soils are moderately fertile, and rainfall not insignificant, reinforced by the substantial hill canal irrigation complex.

For a semi-arid area the population density is high, thanks to the irrigated agriculture, and the population is increasing. However, the 1960s, the decade before our account starts, had seen people leaving the valley to clear land in the Cherangany hills. It was mostly men who left, as testified by the recorded sex ratio in the Tot area. Kenya had become independent in 1963 and the previous colonial policy to prevent people living in the water catchment areas in the hills was no longer upheld. There had been previous “invasions” of the highland forests in the 40s.

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7  Cappon et al. (1985:26-27).
8  Cappon et al. (1985:36-7).
and 50s but now it was on a much higher scale. Land was also becoming available in the neighbouring former white settler areas of Uasin Gishu and Trans Nzoia and a number of people from the valley acquired land there. The acreage under cultivation in the valley fell.\(^9\)

Towards the end of the decade things changed and instead there was a movement of people down the escarpment into the valley,\(^10\) perhaps attracted by the introduction of cotton, rumours that land registration might be under way, and new prospects offered by the establishment of the major development intervention, the Kerio Valley Development Authority (KVDA).

Seasonal migration was also important. Half of the men below 50 years of age left temporarily for the maize harvest on the Uasin Gishu and Trans Nzoia plains. This was from October after the grain crops had been harvested in the valley. The men commonly stayed away for about three months. Work could also be found most of the year in the Marakwet highlands with the planting, weeding and harvesting of maize, beans and pyrethrum. Male migration shows up in the uneven sex ratio in the censuses, but also reflects that more and more men established an additional household with a second or third wife on a plot in the Marakwet highlands. This meant that a wider range of crops could be cultivated, and the conditions for milk cows were better in the highland zone than in the valley. The family became less exposed to the vagaries of weather, disease and cattle raids.

The irrigation farmers of the lowlands had acquired one more economy to cooperate with. When crops failed in the lowlands there were additional possibilities through markets, relatives and acquaintances in the highlands. Along the roads and paths connecting highlands and lowlands in Marakwet there was a steady traffic of maize and beans descending into the valley and of fruits and sweet potatoes being carried up. The Kerio Valley is a harsh environment and diversification a wise strategy — as characterised by irrigated farming, fields in both the valley and the highlands, crop variety, livestock husbandry, bee keeping and seasonal labour migration, together with petty trading and handicraft production.

Even today a sizeable farm in the highlands makes economic sense. However, the valley retains its attraction. Living in the residential areas on the slopes of the Cherangany, maintaining the irrigation canals, keeping goats, and cultivating finger millet and sorghum using the short, small hoe called the mokompo, suitable for the loose soils of the valley (rather than the ordinary industrially-produced hoe), is for some quintessentially what Marakwet life is about. The two types of hoe, the commercially-produced jembe, found all over Kenya, and the much smaller and locally made mokompo, could be said to capture the difference between highlands and lowlands. The jembe is straight, heavy, efficient and used with both hands, while the mokompo is light, versatile, supple and held in one hand. You can twist the mokompo in any direction so that it reaches everywhere; you turn it to crush a clod of earth with the back of the shaft and have made ten moves with it in the time you hit once with a jembe. When a woman leaves home for the fields the mokompo hangs over her shoulder, as if it were part of her, while the commercially-produced hoe has to be carried. (Writing these sentences makes me recall the voices of women descending from the residential areas on the hillsides in the mornings en route to the fields on the valley floor. They had kilometres to cover before they reached the fields, and singing together shortened the journey.)

If a first subjective impression of the valley in the 70s might be one of a stagnant God-forsaken out-of-the-way corner of

\(^9\) Dietz et al. (1987:87).
\(^{10}\) Dietz and van Haastrecht (1982:48).
the country, the population statistics tell of dynamic changes, decade by decade. Change was also true of the farming system where large communal fields were cultivated on the valley floor for about three years and then moved as fertility declined; meanwhile water rights rotated between different lineage groups. At the beginning of each cultivation season the lower parts of the canals were redirected to reach the new fields. Cultivation areas could also be abandoned after attacks by cattle rustlers, and later reoccupied. This has not happened recently but was a reality over long periods of time. New canals are regularly being constructed.

Fields and waterways are thus not static but moving through the landscape and so does the soil itself, as the Marakwet say. It is moved by sheetwash and trapped by rubbish and stone lines. At the field level there is likewise continuous movement. Seeds are broadcasted by hand and buried in soil as women move through the field with their short-hafted hoes. Hoes move water and soil during irrigation so that moisture, nutrients, different types of soils and vegetation may serve the growing crop best. Marakwet fields are mosaics of standing crops, bushes, trapped sediments, micro ponds, low earth banks to slow down the water, vegetation litter that serves the same purpose, and small heaps of drying and mulching weeds. In the fields you may also find minute furrows, pebbles, sticks—remnants of games children played while their mothers worked the land. Bushes and scattered trees are left to support re-vegetation of the land after harvest and to provide shade, while clumps of trees allow people who are working far away from the village to discreetly answer the call of nature.

Watering the fields engages all the farmer’s senses. You feel with your feet how deep the water has entered the soil, or measure it with the *rendur*, the forked stick used for removing thorns from the land when clearing it. If you are still uncertain, a single stab with the hoe will disclose the truth. Water should move gently through the field, reaching where it is needed without causing erosion. The farmer moves with the water. It looks choreographed. The farmer tastes, tests, experiences when the land is saturated, “when it has the smell of rains, of a cool place”. This is when it is time to allow the water to proceed to your neighbour’s field.

Life and livelihoods in the 1970s were dynamic rather than static. At the same time there was a permanency, a stability derived from the substantial investments made over generations to construct the canals, in the farming knowledge built up over time, and in the firm conviction that whatever problems arose could be handled.
in the neighbourhood meetings of peers who sit down to reason over water business, marital strife, thefts, the planning of future communal activities, etc. The irrigation system has survived droughts and warfare, landslides and development agencies. Its resilience lies in this combination of flexibility and permanence. People returning after the warfare of the 1990s revived the structures, and today there are more and longer irrigation canals than ever before.

In an interesting historical study William Adams\(^{11}\) identified a paradox: the colonial administration both recognised that the irrigation complex saved the Marakwet from famine and yet argued in favour of “settled permanent agriculture” with a limited number of permanent canals “correctly aligned and protected”. Ironically, the administration wanted to put an end to the flexibility and adaptability that had seen the system survive for centuries.

The houses on the escarpment

People lived on the slopes of the escarpment in homesteads, which in the mid-70s typically consisted of two round thatched houses facing each other, and grain stores. If the household consisted of more than one wife, or if an adult son or a relative lived in the compound, extra houses were built behind one of the houses or adjacent to the compound. The standard household comprised a man (often seasonally absent), a woman, and three to five children.

Very few rectangular houses were found on the escarpment, but these were standard in the trading centres along the valley road. A count in 1980-81 registered only three rectangular houses, and newly constructed at that, in Sibou village adjacent to Tot, which at the time consisted of 288 households.\(^{12}\) Salaried men owned these houses. The

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\(^{11}\) Adams (1996:161f).

\(^{12}\) Moore (1986:30,132).
difference between households with access to job incomes and those without was considerable.

The furnishings in most houses was simple: sleeping skins, a couple of stools, clay and aluminium pots, gourds, skin bags, enamel cups, plates and bowls. Eating skins were still in use. Some households had a radio, bed and mattress, a table and chairs. Most people owned few items made of cloth. Women and children often dressed in skins.

One still finds this kind of house on the slopes of the Cherangany today, but about half the houses now are rectangular with metal roofs. There are solar panels and gas cookers, TV sets and sofas. Another major difference is that the residential areas give a much greener and livelier impression today. Fruit and shade trees have been planted, and the plots are smaller. There are more people around. At the same time some families have moved down to live on the valley floor, in the small centres along the road, and have also established permanent gardens there. This was strongly advocated by the administration in the 1970s. People lost hours every day moving between the residential zone upland and the fields on the valley floor. Social services were also concentrated in the valley. However, people preferred the slightly cooler climate in the hills and wanted to get away from mosquitoes. They also felt less exposed to cattle raiders in the hills. But now there is a definite move down to the valley floor. The new permanent gardens require more intensive care, and water must be able to reach the fields at all times. When land adjudication eventually reaches the valley, these families will have already safeguarded their interests.

Mobile phones, TV sets, motorcycles... in the midst of such contemporary realities, I recall an old woman back in the 70s who asked me if we had blacksmiths back in my country producing the money that is used in Kenya. She saw me paying salaries and school fees, contributing to fundraisings, buying soft drinks. I seemed to have access to inexhaustible resources. Today's cash economy means that many in the valley can afford what in earlier times appeared to some as unattainable.

The agricultural landscape

Finger millet and sorghum were the main crops in the 70s, with maize becoming increasingly popular. Many families had fruit trees, particularly banana, and some grew vegetables (kale, cabbage, onions, peppers, tomatoes). The main fields for sorghum and finger millet were on the valley floor where a family commonly farmed half to one hectare of communally-controlled land, often in more than one plot. At the onset of
the planting season a group of people would agree on cultivating a particular area, clear and fence the land together, and take water to the land.13 Internally, these large fields were divided between the participating households. The farms on the valley floor were cultivated for about three years and then fallowed. Some families had a field or two by their compound on the slopes of the escarpment. Here it was advisable to terrace the land and this was done with the help of stone lines placed across the slope. The captured sediments gradually built up forward-sloping terraces, allowing water both to infiltrate there and to slowly proceed to the next terrace. Many families also had a maize field of up to a hectare in the higher reaches of the hills, usually growing a hybrid variety. All in all a farm added up to two hectares at most while some cultivated about three-quarters of a hectare. However, there were also parts of the valley where arable land was scarce and landless people had to offer labour, goats, and/or water rights to get land to cultivate.

About half the men had beehives, and honey was an important product. It was common to have about 20 beehives but not that unusual to have 30 to 50. Most households kept poultry and had goats. In a herd of 25 goats some 10 goats could be milked in the wet season and each would provide a cup of milk, which was given to children. Goats were both cash and meat, and were needed for ceremonies. Some families had sheep and cows, but more or less all kept a small herd of goats. Keeping cattle was never important in Marakwet the way it is among the neighbouring East Pokot or the Turkana. And in the last decades of the 20th century it was just too dangerous to keep cattle. You invited raiders, which was definitely deadly. Nevertheless, in the early 70s one could see herds moving in the valley and there were people who identified with their livestock, who talked about the satisfaction of seeing animals coming home from grazing and who wanted others to say about them, “There comes so-and-so with his livestock”. All the same, goats were, and still are, much more important.

Settlements are made with goats. You pay for water with goats. You pay fines in goats. You provide goat’s meat to people who have helped with farm work. Marriage settlements are counted in goats. Goats are slaughtered at initiation celebrations, and at marriages. Goats are seen as active, goats “are tools to boost life”. They are like farm implements, people say.

Sheep are different. They are said to be humble creatures. They do not jump over fences to eat crops. If irrigation canals have been breached, a sheep is sacrificed to heal the wound. When pests destroy crops a sheep is sacrificed to restore the land. A landslide requires that sheep be sacrificed. When someone has been killed, a sheep is slaughtered at the place were blood was shed on the land. But the compensation for the loss is paid in goats. Sheep are for healing wounds and goats for building the future.

13 Land distribution, like water, is complex and has been analysed in several studies (e.g. Adams et al. 1997:715-727, Critchley 1979:10-11, Dietz et al. 1987:49-51, Ssennyonga 1983:102-110), and new studies are just now being prepared for publication.
Crop histories

The Marakwet have grown finger millet and sorghum as far back as memory goes. The first trials with maize in the valley were initiated by the British in 1918, but did not attract much interest. By the mid-1930s maize was still hardly grown at all. However it slowly gained in popularity and in the 70s most households had a maize field. Hybrid varieties were available, particularly Coast Composite maize, and the sorghum variety Serena gained in popularity. There was a local market for maize, particularly among teachers, traders, agency staff and other modernising groups.

The colonial agricultural service introduced cassava in the 1930s, which by the 1970s was grown by most families. Cassava constituted a valuable backup if the cereals did not do well. Bananas and sweet potatoes had long been popular and other successful introductions were groundnuts, cowpeas, sugar cane, chilli peppers and mangoes. None, however, were a commercial success. The markets were too far away, and the roads deplorable. Farmers drew the conclusion that since there was nowhere to sell finger millet, there was no point extending the fields. A typical remark from valley farmers at the time was that they cultivated “for the family, not to sell. It is not like the highlands where people open new lands all the time”. Cash crops did not take off, and lowland Marakwet remained basically a subsistence economy. Very few people had salaried incomes.

All farm work was by hand, as is still the case today. Fields were cleared using a machete and an axe. Thorns were gathered with large wooden forks and burnt in the fields; some were used for fencing. Fertility management was limited to falling, while manure could be added to the more permanently cultivated fields on the slopes of the escarpment.

Labour parties were common and participants remunerated with goat’s meat, other food, or local beer. Sometimes a small amount of money was offered, often spent on beer.

Yields were low. Finger millet and maize produced about 600-800 kg/ha, sorghum a bit less. Hybrid varieties and additional weeding easily doubled the production. Families counted on getting about ten bags of grain to live on for a year. “Only in bad years will there be a clear food deficit, but for some the stores of millet and sorghum from former good years, the food exchange relationship with highland relatives, and the money available can form a buffer against famine.” In plots closer to the river good harvests of maize could be expected. A pioneering farmer who went further west and planted near the Kerio River harvested over 2,000 kg/ha. There were signs that things could quickly change.

Cash was derived from selling animals, fruits, vegetables, tobacco, hides and skins, honey, handicrafts and home-brewed beer, with additional income coming from day labouring and the remittances of family members living outside the valley. Bananas were a steady provider of petty cash and were also bartered, as were cassava and sweet potatoes, for maize and beans (in the highlands) or milk (with the Pokot).

Development initiatives

The colonial period was only a decade distant in the mid-70s, and much more a living reality in people’s minds than it is

14 Dietz et al. (1987:82).
15 Critchley (1979:12,14).
16 Dietz et al. (1987:33).
17 Critchley (1979:17).
today. It was still possible to interview men who had fought in the Far East for the British during WW2. Other elders reminisced about expeditions to Lake Turkana to load donkeys with a type of salt used in preparing the snuff that most men and women used, and which was a standard item at the local markets. The Somali traders at Chesegon represented a link back to the times of the caravans. The churches, secondary schools and the hospital at Kapsowar were still largely managed by Europeans. However, major changes were just around the corner. Two agricultural extension workers and an animal health assistant were posted to Tot, and the Catholic church at Chesongoch hired an agriculturist for a three-year period who came to initiate demonstration plots, provide agricultural inputs, start educational programmes, tree nurseries and a host of other activities.

Cotton was introduced, and an Endo Farmers Cooperative Society was formed. Tractors arrived to plough 200 acres on the valley floor. The harvest was good, and lorries from the Cotton Board came to collect. People were paid KSh 2/kg. Things worked. It was suggested that the society should open an account with the Cooperative Bank. This meant that payment was no longer cash on delivery directly to the producers, but went to the cooperative office at the district headquarters in Iten. A representative for the Tot society was to collect the money. This proved difficult. No money reached Tot and the cotton project collapsed. A new start was made in 1983. And so it continued, with ups and downs. Today cotton is not a priority in Tot.

Investments in rural development rose sharply, largely financed by foreign donors. One buzz project succeeded the other: soil and water conservation campaigns, water development, rural access roads, afforestation, the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands Project, and so on. The Kerio Valley Development Authority, established in 1979 by an Act of Parliament, was to cater for a major transformation of the valley, including new permanent irrigation
canals and drawing a railway line through the valley to be able to export on a large scale. More schools and health facilities were to be provided, as were improved agricultural extension services, new cattle dips, tree nurseries, provision of improved seeds, veterinary medicine, large-scale conservation efforts, green belts, mineral exploration, and many other initiatives. In 1982-83 the KVDA opened an irrigated experimental farm employing 100 locally-recruited casual labourers. In 1989 the Kapiisyiyo clan provided land for another KVDA farm. A nursery was established at Embobut River and a wide range of crops was planted: finger millet, white sorghum, maize, cassava, watermelons, tomatoes, onions. The harvest was good and some of it was displayed at the Kaamariny Agricultural Show.

But then came the large-scale cattle raiding that plagued the area in the 1990s, which forced people to retreat to the hills for safety. Fields were abandoned and schools, dispensaries and shops closed. Trade came to a standstill. For some time the valley was basically deserted and the KVDA left. By 2002 there was again peace in the valley. The irrigation system was restored, the valley fields could again be cultivated and life returned to normal. The violence during the 1990s was extreme, but cattle raiding has a long history in the Kerio Valley and was also present in the mid-70s.

Development interventions have succeeded each other. KVDA is again a presence but its grand plans are yet to materialise. The most recent large-scale project was initiated in 2012 by the Red Cross, with the intention to permanently cultivate 500 hectares on the valley floor. The scale has already been reduced by half, and the long-term ecological viability of this major project has not been studied. Exports will depend on whether a permanent road to Eldoret is constructed. However, a local committee of farmers has been formed and expectations are high.

Among all the well-meaning interventions, what have so far shown to improve livelihoods in the valley are on an altogether different scale: fruit tree nurseries, improved seeds, and mobile phones. Everyone benefits, and there are no accounts to manage.

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Later I had the good fortune to cooperate with Florence Jemutai Cheptum, M.A., an equally brilliant fieldworker. She is moreover competent in the recently standardised orthography of the Marakwet language and undertook the transcription of Marakwet terms and quotations in this text.

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18 Were (1983).
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

References