Interviews in Chad were all conducted in Arabic. The first group of interviews were collected from Mara, a fishing community on the River Chari, north of the capital, N’Djaména. Albertine Ndonadji and Abderaman Issa Youssouf interviewed fishing people and farmers. The same team also undertook interviews at Oum-Hadjer, 650 km east of N’Djaména, the site of an Oxfam/SECADEV (Secours Catholique et Développement) project supporting agro-pastoralists. The work was coordinated by Rhiannon Barker with Mahamat Ahmad Alhabo, a research associate at the Institut National des Sciences Humaines in N’Djaména.

Nizela Idriss (F), Alhi-bel, Koundjar

As her cows drank from the watering holes which the men kept full of water pulled from the well, Nizela Idriss talked to us under a shelter. She was a small woman with a warm smile, preoccupied with making sure her visitors were fully covered by the small area of shade provided by her shelter. Each time she noticed the sun creeping on to one of our limbs she would tap the exposed area with her stick, urging us to move into the shade. Despite the rain which had fallen the night before, the sandy soil was parched and the watering holes soaked up the water almost as quickly as the men poured it in.

We have been living in this camp, Alhi-bel, for about four years now. It is an hour’s walk from the nearest watering hole. When the rains start we will move away to find new pasture for our animals. In this camp there are six families, who always move around together. When my own children marry they will choose people from our camp; that way we stay together.
Since my youth I have lived under the threat and insecurity of fighting. The first problems I remember were tribal; between the Masaguete and the Ratamine. It must have been a dispute over rights to water or to land. These are the only things that neighbouring tribes argue about. As for the war between Chad and Libya, I never knew why they were fighting, although of course I saw the planes fly over and knew that our sons were dying. My own son went to join the fighting, and now he lies with many others, buried in the ground.

When I was young I never had the chance to go to school. I wanted my children to learn, but when my son was educated he decided to join the army and now he is dead. That has discouraged me from seeking education for the rest of my children since I cannot bear to lose any more. One of my younger sons is with his aunt in Mongo, a few hundred kilometres from here, and attends the Qur'anic school. I need the help and support of my children. I am an old woman—do you think that I can look after my animals on my own? No, it’s my son who does that for me. He is only 10 years old, but he is not afraid of his job and does not fear spending a night or two in the bush with his animals.

Today we have about 10 cows, two of them mine and the rest my husband’s. It doesn’t matter who they belong to since we all benefit from them. We do not sell their milk since our herds are not large and their productivity is not as high as it used to be. I value my animals more than anything else.

Before the drought of 1985 we had about 20 cows, 30 goats and three donkeys. Some of these died and others we sold to buy food. Since that time our animals have reproduced steadily, but the herd has not increased in size because we have had to sell some animals in order to buy other essentials. When my parents were alive they had over 100 head of cattle. Then my father died and my mother left the country to go to Sudan. She felt that life was more secure there and moreover it meant she was able to avoid paying taxes.

"The time we sold our necklaces"

We have suffered four major famines during my lifetime. The first was called Amzaytone, meaning “the time we sold our necklaces”, in the 1950s. The second, about 10 years later, was El Harigue, “the year when everything burnt”, when our crops shrivelled under the heat of the sun. The third, in 1982, was Alchouil, “the year of the sack”, when traders came with sacks of millet for us to buy. As long as you had the means, you did not starve during this famine. Finally, in 1985 the big famine came upon us. We called this Laitche, meaning “the year when everyone fled from the area”
from the area”. At other times of difficulty, the men would go and leave the women behind. We would supplement our diet with wild plants. We picked the leaves from the savonnier tree and the amuzba, boiled them in water and mixed the solution with any millet flour that we had. We also dug the termite mounds to unearth the grain they store. To make extra money we sold firewood and our jewellery in the market. When we had used all the money we had, we would be forced to sell one of our animals. If our animals died we would eat the flesh left on their bodies, not by choice, but because the famine forced us to do this.

I farm my own field which is separate from my husband’s. We both do all the work. Before the rains we put our animals in the field to improve the fertility. Those who have no animals of their own ask their brother to bring his animals into the field. This is something that’s done as a favour, not for payment. This keeps the fields so fertile that we can continue to cultivate year after year. Before the rains we plough our fields by hand and sow the crops. We plant sorghum, millet and beri beri. We used to plant groundnuts but the grasshoppers attacked them so voraciously that in the end we stopped.

After the drought of 1985 we lost all our seed, so the following year we had to use seed collected from people who had come from other parts of the country, even from Sudan. These days productivity is much lower. In a good year, before 1985, we could produce eight sacks of grain from
our field; today that has fallen to three sacks. However much we produce we don’t sell our crops. We keep them for our own consumption or we share them.

**Modern life**

What strikes me most, when I think about how life has changed since I was a child, is that people today all wear modern clothes, and that women have more freedom than they did. Little by little men have begun to expect women to participate more equally in their activities and jobs. Nowadays, if we don’t go to help men in the fields they will say: “Eh! Why do you not help me plant my crops?” Those people in the village of Koundjar can afford to let their women sit and grow fat, but we do not have the luxury of choice. We have to work, and through our work we have gained more freedom. So, there have been some positive changes, but overall I yearn for the past when we had big herds, lots of milk and food in plenty.

**C2 Ashta Ahmat (F), Adirté Sabana**

Ashta Ahmat is president of the groupement féminin, a group of agro-pastoralist women who participate in a credit scheme run by Oxfam/SECADEV. On the day of our interview the group was meeting to discuss new developments and to look at the credit situation of individual members. Ashta took us into her tent, made from a framework of strong, flexible branches covered in matting, and gave us a drink of milk, millet and water. We wandered down to the dry river bed, and sat talking in the shade. Ashta’s two-year-old boy, who cried incessantly, stared glumly at the mango we gave him and was only pacified when his mother tied him firmly to her back.

My life has been long and God has been generous. I have given birth to 10 children and thank God that six are still living. The others died when they were babies, weakened by diarrhoea and other diseases.

I can remember several periods of famine. Ajaradie was “the year of the grasshopper”. In fact, they fought against us for two years in a row, eating the crops we had struggled to grow. Amhanzine was the year when a koro of millet cost 250 CFA—in a good year a koro only cost 30 CFA. The last major famine was the “Great Famine” of 1985, when most of our people were forced to migrate from this area.

I stayed here, raising a small amount of money from selling some of our male animals and the milk from our cows. I carried on making and selling mats but I had to lower the price a bit to encourage people to buy them. Today I sell a small mat for 165 CFA, whereas during the famine
it only fetched 75 CFA. In the end I was forced to run away too. With my husband and children I embarked on a 12-day 300-kilometre journey to Bidkin, where we had relatives who we knew would do all they could to help us.

Before 1985 I had 18 animals of my own. It is true that my husband owns most of the cattle, but when a woman marries she receives a number of animals from her husband as a bride-price. I have eight cows left now and my husband's herd is reduced too.

My husband has a field which I help him to farm. Our main crops are millet and sorghum. The clay content in the soil varies considerably in this area. In some places it is almost all sand and can only be ploughed if the rains have been very good. Recently we have begun to plant tomatoes, melons and gombo in the rainy season. Our neighbours have planted mangoes which they irrigate with water drawn from a well donated by Action Contre la Famine. Some time ago I planted cassava, but the seeds were not disease-resistant so I copied some of my friends and turned to sugar cane. I dug my own well, about 4 metres deep, which I use to water my crops. We cannot dig a well in the camp because the water table is too low, so we move down to the dry river bed but even here we have to dig deeper each year.
We keep our animals in our fields to fertilise the land before the rains. At planting time we usually move our animals about 1 kilometre from the fields. In very dry years we may have to go further but rarely more than 20-30 kilometres. One of our problems is the increased competition for land. Large herds pass through here on their way to seasonal pastures, eating our pasture as they go.

The groupement helps the women by providing credit to buy the materials to make mats. I wouldn’t say the project has altered relations between men and women. I command the same respect as before, but now I know that I can rely on my own income, and this makes me stronger. Other things are easier for women. We have more mobility and it’s easier to find food for our families. If something is lacking, we can find vitamins at the pharmacy.

Circumcision
Women and men are both circumcised. Circumcision marks the entry of a child into the adult world. It is a time of celebration. We slaughter animals and dance, perhaps with more energy and vigour for a boy than a girl. A girl is circumcised at home when she is 7 or 8 years old. Her labia are cut with a knife by a woman who is skilled at her job. There is nothing to kill the pain, so we just have to be brave. If the wound goes septic we rub hot oil on it with a piece of cotton. Then we burn and grind cow dung and sprinkle the powder on the wound. It should heal within 7-8 days. Today the operation is less prone to problems, since at the first sign of infection we go to the pharmacy and buy tetracycline. Of course everyone should be circumcised. It is our custom. It’s natural to be frightened, but it is simply something we have to bear.

C48 Abdoulaye Issaka (M, 65 years), Koundjar
There has been a change of mentality between us— the young—and our parents. The parents would never have taken the initiative to learn the methods of vaccination for the animals; we, on the other hand, we have done it. When our parents were confronted by some difficulty imposed by nature, they used to seek immediately to leave the area and go elsewhere. But we, we try to resolve the problem and struggle to resist, to stay put at all costs. So there you have the difference between us.

C22 Madeline Koubou (F), Mara
I split up with my husband a long time ago. I don’t expect I will ever go back to the home we had together. Sleeping on the same mat as him is not my idea of paradise because he used to treat me like a slave, an animal. I know he is the father of my children and for this reason if something happened to him I would, of course, offer him emotional and material support—but not as the husband of my heart.
Mariam Madra (F), Ad Djob, Koudere

My husband died many years ago, leaving me to look after my children in these difficult times. I don’t know if things are harder simply because he is no longer with us or because the land and climate seem to fight against us. Today, the only way I can make money is by grinding millet and weaving mats which we sell in the market.

We suffered a lot in this area from fighting between different ethnic groups. Armed bandits would come to our village, demanding money and animals. I had to give them the equivalent of 30,000 CFA. Of course, I didn’t have this money and had to give some of my animals instead. It was Arabs from the south who terrorised us in this way.

In those days we had enough animals. Today I look around me and wonder where they have gone. When I married, my husband gave me a few of my own animals as a bride-price, which I was able to build up into a small herd. All I have left is one cow, some calves and three donkeys. I have a few chickens as well, but what is the value of those? They are not livestock.

Our fields are next to the camp. We no longer grow cotton because it was particularly susceptible to grasshoppers and because we can buy cheap ready-made clothes. Millet seems to grow better and is our major food crop.
**Pests**

One year the grasshoppers were so bad that we had to ask the state for assistance. They gave us powder to put on the land but it didn’t kill the pests. The men also went to the marabout for help. He would beat his drums and cry to God but even this did not work. The only thing that was really effective was when the women themselves went to stand in the fields, from dawn to dusk, throwing stones and shouting to frighten off all the “intruders” who tried to snatch a bite to eat from our crops.

When I was young, men and women used to farm together in the same field. Now the men spend so much time travelling in search of work elsewhere that it’s more practical for the women to have their own fields. Our men are courageous—they go as far as Nigeria to find work—but sometimes I feel it is the women, who stay here with the children, not knowing where they are going to find the next meal, who are stronger. Women only ever leave the area during a very severe drought, if they can no longer find food for the family.

The first big famine I remember was Amzaytone, the name of the pearls in our necklace which we had to sell to raise money for food. Then there was the year when millet was brought from other regions on the backs of donkeys. The most recent was in 1985, when everyone left the village. I left reluctantly for Abeche, with my children. We were gone for two months, and I found work grinding grain for women living in town.

When food is short we try to supplement our income by weaving mats. A good price for an average-sized mat is 500 CFA, or 450 CFA when they are not in such demand. That is what we get for about seven days’ work, which does not include the time spent collecting and cutting the rônier plant and dyeing the straw. To make one mat you need about three bundles of rônier leaves.

We have to be resourceful since things do not come ready-made in this part of the world. The woven basket hanging on the wall was made by the blacksmith’s wife—that work is too intricate for me. The grainstore in the corner of the room took three days to make from clay and grass. Last year our seeds were wasted as the rains came early. This year I pray that God will provide me with enough grain to fill two grainstores, since this is the amount that I need to feed my family without having to buy any extra.

I don’t have any daughters, which means that some of the work that girls would normally do I have to manage myself, even though I am growing old and weak. I have to grind the grain and go out with my friends to collect wood. Although I have a donkey, I normally carry the wood myself since I like to accompany my friends.
The water supply is one of our biggest worries. We dig holes in the dried-up river bed, managing to get just enough muddy water to meet our needs. I don’t know if this contributes to the diseases we suffer from. Many of us, both young and old, are plagued by health problems. I am sick myself. I have this swelling in my neck [goitre], and a fever. Some people say there is a plant called terres azarack which would help reduce the swelling. I have already tried to treat myself by burning the tips of my fingers and the ends of my toes—they are quite scarred now. It helped me a little, since at least now my appetite has returned.

SECADEV has greatly contributed to the development of the village, but there is so much that could be done. Improving our food would be one of my priorities. We women have no kind of formal organisation—we just work on our own as we have always done. It seems to me that women lack initiative and motivation.

There is no school in this village. Neither my husband nor I went to school, it is not part of our tradition. It’s more important that my children learn the Qur’an. That is why I send them to be taught by the marabout. The best advice you can give a child is to work hard and value the productivity of the fields, and not to leave the place where they were born.

**Haoua Talba Hadj (F), Mara**

I was born on the Cameroon side of Mara. My father was a fisherman who owned a dugout canoe and a net “en baguette”, made from strips of wood. We used paddles, as there were no motors then. Today fishing is hard because there is not so much water in the rivers. We try to care for our environment, and since the big trees have disappeared we have begun planting neem and mango.

Fishing was once a profitable occupation. My father used to catch so many fish that he would throw some back. His catch included capitaine, brochet, carp and silure. Now these varieties are rare and some have disappeared altogether. Our existence as a fishing community has grown more fragile.

After a good season there is also some money to be made from the sale of crops. Before, there was always enough millet for us to sell some in the middle of the rainy season. Now the weather is unpredictable and we have to wait until the end of the season to feel secure enough to sell off the supplies from the previous year. When the rains were strong and regular the climate was cold and fresh. We were fortunate. Now the rain has been...now men spend so much time travelling in search of work that it’s more practical for women to have their own fields.
replaced by a heat which beats down with full force.

Today, we drink water which comes from the pump. Before, we never thought twice about drinking water from the river. The wells are dug by the state. We haven’t done anything towards their construction. We used to have very simple wells, without any pipes like the ones we see today. We put shafts in the bottom to ensure that the sides did not cave in.

Of the crops we plant, rice is the most productive and the work is not hard. A sack of rice fetches between 2,500 and 4,000 CFA. Sorghum is another good crop, better than maize. After three years of sowing the same piece of ground, we give that area a rest and move on to another, where we burn the bushes to clear the land. We have neither ploughs nor tractors so we prepare the land with hoes. Of course, with tractors or ploughs our yields would be higher but we would have to be trained to use them.

We keep a few sheep, of “Peulh quality”. As soon as we notice anything wrong with our animals we take them to the vet in the neighbouring village, about 5 kilometres from here. During the dry season we supplement their diet with millet husks and other products that we buy in N’Djaména.

**Food aid**

Life seems to be full of difficulties which multiply all the time. Even looking after a child, from infancy to adulthood, is a terribly difficult job. Famine can be a great trial. One famine lasted for four years. Throughout that time we managed to grow produce in our vegetable garden and sold it in order to buy staple foods. At the height of the famine the state provided us with sweets, semolina, red millet and rice but over the last few years it has given us nothing in the way of food. It is only groups such as widows who may receive a sack of grain between them. When the state stopped giving us food aid we went back to working on the land, planting maize twice in one year. The state gave us cattle-cakes, which improved our yield. After the harvest we gave a percentage of our crops to the state in payment for the cattle-cakes.

We take our fish to Yaroua in Cameroon where we buy cereals. Even the women have begun to make this journey. In the past none of this was necessary. If one year there was not enough rain, the following year would bring a lot of rain to relieve the suffering.

I never got the chance to go to school. I didn’t even undergo a proper course at the Qur’anic school. I went for two years to learn how to pray but then I gave it up. All my children, except the youngest one, have been to school. Of the seven I brought into the world, three gave up their education, but the other three have carried on.
When I was young the women would rise very early in the morning to go and look for water. On their return they would sweep the area in front of their houses. Then they would remove the husks from the millet, grind the grain with a mortar and pestle and make boule from the flour. While we were busy with these chores our husbands would go out fishing, bringing back their catch for us to treat and dry. When the fish had been prepared, we tied them in a sack, ready for our husbands to sell to the traders who passed through Mara. Our husbands gave us a share of the money to meet our own needs.

Desertification
One thing we do not sell is firewood. We use all that we can get for cooking. If it was only us using the wood there would still be trees around us, but people come from far afield and destroy our vegetation. They come from as far away as Farcha or N’Djaména on the backs of donkeys, in lorries or pushing carts, piling the wood on to their various forms of transport. This is what has turned the land into desert. In an attempt to stop the practice a number of forestry guards have come to live with us in Mara.

Women belong to the house. Children should support their parents, the girls helping their mother and the boys their father. They should be given the utmost encouragement to go to school and should only be expected to help their parents in the holidays.
A woman’s cooking pot is never far away from her. The basic dish I give my family is rice or boule with a sauce made from onions, oil, salt, water, gombo and a bit of hot pepper. In addition to housework a wife may also be called upon to help her husband, just as the man may help his wife.

There is a group of women here who carry out certain collective social activities. For example, they welcome all strangers who come to Mara, and they offer support to bereaved villagers. We all put money into a fund to pay for social occasions such as these. People simply give if and when they are able.

C18 Elisabeth Nadjio (F, 45 years), Mara

Our presence in Elisabeth’s compound caused much hilarity among the family and friends who looked on. Although reticent at first, Elisabeth was encouraged and greatly amused by the sound of her voice on tape. A burning hot wind, and a goat which had taken a fancy to the plastic cover of the tape-recorder, soon drove us into the shelter of her hut.

Nadjio, the name given to me by my parents, means “survivor from death”. I was born in N’Djamena and grew up there. When we were very small, our mothers or older sisters would carry us on their backs. As we grew older we wore cloth to hide our nakedness and put smaller pieces of cloth across our chest to protect our breasts. We tried to make ourselves look beautiful by smearing our bodies with cream, hoping that we would turn the eyes of the young men as they walked by.

Courtship

My husband came to my home to court me. It was important that we should do our best to look good, since looks were the basis of our choice. The pleasure shared between a boy and girl was based on observation of each other. Young men are like goats looking for grazing on the banks—you see them roaming everywhere, looking for girls.

My husband always had to come to my home with a companion. When a suitor arrived at your house you had to go out and welcome him. It was acceptable to chat together but you could not draw close to each other. When your visitors wanted to leave you had to accompany them as far as the path. At this point it was up to your suitor’s companion to impart the reason for the visit. Once the marriage had been agreed between all the parties concerned, the bride-price had to be arranged. The first night of marriage was always hard for the newly weds, since to enter into a sexual
relationship the man has to fight for, and win, physical dominance over
the woman.

As young people we would sometimes refuse to help prepare the
evening meal because it was more exciting to go out with our friends. As
a punishment our parents would not give us anything to eat, or at best they
would leave the millet for us to grind ourselves. Today, if a girl cannot
get the food she wants from her parents, she can buy it from the shop or
the market.

I have had six children—four girls and two boys—although death has
taken three of them from me. Just as it was God who was the instigator of
my marriage, so it is God who decides how many children are born to us.
Today I am divorced as a result of a domestic argument. I could no longer
tolerate what was expected of me. Perhaps one day I will go to my
husband’s house to seek his pardon.

**Brewing**

I like to use a lot of oil and onions in my cooking. Of course, during times
of drought we have to cook very simply, using salted water and a tiny
amount of oil. To make a bit of money and satisfy my friends I make
alcohol and *bili bili*. It takes almost three days to make the alcohol. I grind
the grain and make it into a dough which I then boil all night, before
leaving it to ferment. Using a pipe I filter the mixture. The alcohol is
produced in the vapours of the boiling dough. *Bili bili* also takes three
days. I make a gruel from the grain which I then boil and ferment all
through the first evening. It is heated to a very high temperature and then
left to cool and ferment.

Today in Mara, although the water has dried up and the environment
is seriously degraded, we are still able to feed ourselves. There are two
factors at work here: the first is God. But God’s help is never enough on
its own. We must add our own contribution to His assistance. The woman
should arm herself with an axe, and the man with a hoe, and together they
must go and clear the land.

Men and women often share the work in the field. You have to clear
the trees and burn the vegetation to make more space. We are discerning
about the trees that we cut down: we do not touch those that give us shade
or that bear wild fruit for us to eat.

Our ground never refuses to accept what we plant. Even if it is
tired it still does its best to produce a small amount.
another. Once the seeds have been sown the soil has to be weeded to prevent *belbeshre*, *haya* and *shiga* from destroying the crop.

We drink the water from the river, in the same way as our grandparents did. Even now that there is a tap, I still prefer the river water.

### C28 Djimé Mahamat (M), Mara

There was once a chief in the village who taught us how to catch crocodiles. I learnt with him for a long time, maybe seven years. He taught us all the tricks that we needed to know so that we could eventually catch them on our own.

The first night I was taken out by the chief I remember sitting in a boat, a torch in my left hand and a spear in my right. Another man sat at the front of the boat, moving it slowly forwards. The night was dark, so I lit a torch to help me see the surface of the water. Suddenly I saw a crocodile. We moved slowly through the water towards it and, when we were a certain distance away, I hurled my spear. The crocodile tried to flee but the spear, which was attached to an iron chain, had pierced its flesh. We moved the boat forward, dragging the wounded, struggling crocodile behind us. It was still alive, so we gave it a blow on the neck and at last it died.

**“Crocodile hunting is not easy”**

After killing a crocodile we would skin it. We sold the skins to white people who came specially to buy them. Crocodile hunting is not easy. You have to be brave and take a lot of risks. Each time we went hunting we would go to the chief who gave us a charm to protect us from the more dangerous elements lurking in the water.

One day a Frenchman turned up at Mara. He introduced himself to our chief and asked if he could employ a group of crocodile hunters. The chief agreed in principle and organised a team of six. We travelled in our boat to N’Djaména, where we were collected by the Frenchman in his car. Together we drove down to the south of the country, arriving eventually in the region of Kyabé, where there are known to be a lot of crocodiles. The Frenchman told us that he had to return to the capital but would come back to pick us up.

When he had left, we all went our separate ways, since we could catch more crocodiles, more quickly, if we worked on our own. We managed to catch over 50. We were very happy with our work but a major problem was that we had not taken enough charms to protect us over the course of
such intensive hunting. We told the Frenchman about this problem and fortunately he was sensitive to our needs. He produced a number of new charms, which we found most effective. From then on we never encountered any problems with our prey.

After six months we had a collection of beautiful crocodiles which the Frenchman came to pick up. For each skin we received the sum of 500,000 CFA. We returned with the money to Mara, where we spent some time with our relatives.

After a while we wanted another adventure, so we sought permission to hunt crocodiles in the Central African Republic (CAR). When we arrived there, we found that the crocodiles were not so easy to catch. When the Frenchman arrived to buy our skins he found us with fewer than he had hoped for. He was disappointed: he had been relying on our catch. He proposed that two of us should go to Zaire to try our luck there. We were a bit unsure and told him that we could not go there without a guarantee. Understanding our predicament he suggested that we go with him to Zaire to evaluate the situation. If it looked as if crocodiles were plentiful, then he planned to return to pick up the others in our group. If the animals were in short supply, he would bring us back to the CAR. As it turned out we spent a whole day searching for crocodiles without success, and the Frenchman kept his promise by taking us back to the CAR. We stayed there for another two years before finally returning to Mara.

A few months later, the Frenchman came to Mara and tried to persuade us to return to Zaire. Although some of us had misgivings after the last experience, we left for Zaire, where we were given permission by the authorities to hunt in a clearly defined zone.

We began the hunt in a little lake where the rewards of our labours were not great. We moved on to another lake, but once again we found hardly any crocodiles. Our boss advised us to go further afield and said we should not worry about what the authorities had said. So, as he instructed, we followed the lakes and the rivers until we left the zone within which we had been authorised to hunt. Unfortunately, we were caught trespassing and held by the authorities for 12 days, before being deported.

Before we left, we went to see our boss, to ask him to take us back to Chad. He refused to help us in our plight, so we left on our own. He has never set foot again in this village, even though he has children here by his Zairean wife.
Abouna Ali (M), Mara

The water in the River Chari used to be so high that it came up to this spot—where today you can see some trees and bushes growing. In those days this area was like a forest. The men who cut the trees could be heard singing in the forest. It used to take us a whole day to walk to N'Djaména because we had to clear a path through the bush. Now there is nothing to block our way. It is a desert out there. The rain no longer falls and there are no longer any little streams where the fish can lay their eggs before swimming back into the main river. If there are no eggs, how can there be any fish?

Ceremonies cast aside
The fishing season began in June when the first rains started. During the rains, the fish would reproduce in large numbers. My parents used to sacrifice sheep or goats by the side of the river. The atmosphere was always festive. After we had eaten our fill we would throw the goat skins into the river. Only when this ceremony was complete could we begin our fishing. One year the marabout told us to stop this practice. He said we were following the path of the devil. Our parents were discouraged and they cast aside the traditions of their ancestors. I no longer asked my
neighbours for a bowl of honey before going down to the river. That had been my custom. I used to bring a bowl of honey myself and ask each of my neighbours for a similar offering. Then I would buy a red chicken and make a sacrifice of these gifts to the river, before setting out to catch the fish. When I pulled in my nets I would always share the catch with my neighbours.

Our boats were bought from the Bagrimiens. They had big nets attached to them which would sweep through the water, dragging the fish into them. The nets we use today are lighter and more manageable. The boats were made from the wood of the *mourai* tree. This does not grow in our area, hence we were not able to make them ourselves. I know that the process of hollowing out the trunk and carving the inside and outside used to take about 15 days.

Some people fished with a rod and line, using hooks made by the blacksmiths. When *les blancs* appeared in our country, they brought hooks which cost as little as 25 CFA. But although some equipment has got cheaper, our life has not been made easier—since the fish have disappeared. We blame our suffering on the bad rains. The land dried up and the trees died. People who found it hard to earn a living began to cut down the remaining trees to make charcoal which they sold as fuel. In this way the environment deteriorated, and now the desert is advancing more quickly than ever.

Years ago our fish were in great demand. Some were taken as far as France. We sold a lot at the big fish market in Farcha. The Bornu people came from Nigeria with their donkeys to buy dried fish. They grew so rich that now they have abandoned their donkeys for modern vehicles. Even Chadian merchants come in their cars to buy our fish. If we have fish to sell during the rains, when the cars cannot drive over the muddy roads, we take them to N’Djaména by boat. In 1964 a Frenchman established a cooperative here, through which we could sell our fish at a profit. This venture lasted until about 13 years ago, when the climate began to deteriorate.

*Lost traditions*

Our traditions have been buried in the sand. The menace of famine looms over us. We, the Kotoko people, are a race of fishermen. Now that our fish have gone, what are we supposed to do? After the last famine we knew that fishing was on the decline, so we looked for jobs as labourers and mechanics. We began to rely more on farming. The pastoralists did not manage so well. When their animals died, all they could do was make charcoal to sell.
In the time of my grandparents, if we could not find work in our village we would travel to our neighbours and help them to weave cotton. My parents used to buy their own cotton supplies from the Bornu people of Nigeria. They used to make their clothes. Men were particularly skilled at weaving and could make a big piece of cloth in three days. Cotton cost 4-5 CFA per basket. In return the Bornu would buy our dried fish, which cost 8 CFA for one dried salanga. We used “English money” and other currencies and some people used beads.

In the past, hares, monkeys and birds could cause all sorts of terrible damage. To guard against them we went to the fields at six in the morning and did not leave until the sun had set. Today we have relaxed our guard since the animals are quite rare. In addition to my main crop of millet I have a small vegetable garden where I plant tomatoes, gombo, karkadeh and lettuce. I am able to supplement my income by making clothes and mending radios and watches. I can mend pumps as well, since I have a few mechanical skills.

There have been many changes. Now we have a primary school, attended even by the children of the marabout and the chief. When it first opened we did not think that it was wise to send our children there, so it was only orphans who were educated.

We used to respect our parents, because it was they who put our clothes on our backs. We washed their hands before they ate and respected their wishes if they did not want to eat with us. When we married, we no longer claimed a share of their harvest but gave them a share of ours. Today young people have their own ideas—but they still feel the pull of their ancestors and they do not leave Mara for long. There have been times when I left Mara, but I always returned.

C49 Adoum Mahamat (M, 50 years), Koundjar
When we were young we worked with our parents; it was they who bought us what we needed. Today the young people go to work in the towns and bring money when they return, and it is they who give money to their parents. That is how much times have changed.

C31 Fatimé Achoumboule (F, 50 years), Mara
We used to say that if you worked you could have everything you wanted. It was only those who did not pull their weight who found themselves struggling. Then a year came when locusts appeared from the skies and destroyed all our crops and we realised that this statement was no longer true. Something more than hard work was necessary for survival.
Thomas Maskemnggar (M), Mara

My parents came from Gabringolo. I was taken to N’Djaména when I was a child. Later, I did some travelling—but being a man who could not forsake his native land, I returned.

Before my birth my mother got divorced. My father’s family were angry and cursed the place where my mother was, and when I was born I was very ill. I was laid by the river where it was coolest and given the traditional treatment for mindakoro. You can easily die of this if the symptoms are not recognised, but the people in the village are very good at identifying and treating such diseases.

Some of my relatives wanted to marry my mother after her divorce but they were afraid because my father was still alive. One of them put a spell on me and lodged a gaya—the fruit of the dom palm—in my armpit. It was one of my grandfathers who managed to cut it out and release me from the suffering.

I paid bride-price for a wife but my cousins wrecked the chance of this marriage because of an old quarrel between her family and my uncle’s. I am looking for a wife at present, but I want a model wife.

Locusts

When I was a child there was a famine, caused by locusts swarming in such numbers that they turned day into night and destroyed everything edible. People in the village were forced to dig for wild tubers but some died trying doing this because the famine had made them so weak. Children were particularly liable to die unless given special care.

After that, people had to settle by the river so that they could get the food they needed by fishing. They would also wrap fish in titimri, a plant from the river bank, and take them to areas untouched by the disaster, where they exchanged them for millet. Some people from unaffected places came to the famine areas, bringing millet to exchange for fish, but then they promptly started fishing themselves.

As a child I went to school until I dropped out to join my friends and start fishing. In the past, people refused schooling out of ignorance, but these days everyone wants to educate their children. God willing, the wife I find will be able to read and write, so that even if I’m not at home she can write to tell me how the children are, or read a prescription if the doctor orders medicine. I will send my children to school and in the holidays I will teach them to fish, and that way they will get the best of both worlds.

I plough when there is a lot of rain, when it is not possible to fish. People grow maize, red millet and beans. We can only cultivate small

There was a famine, caused by locusts swarming in such numbers that they turned day into night.
We have no means of knowing why it is hot or cold. Only God knows plots because it is forbidden to clear the ground by cutting down young bushes. We grow maize twice a year and the other food crops just once. Women grow okra and sorrel, and men help them as women are not as strong as men. Women also gather firewood, fetch water, pick, pound and grind millet, make the food and brew bili bili, which they sell so as to buy salt. Men, too, have other work. After working in the fields they go hunting for small game to bring home for cooking.

We move from one piece of ground to another, and let the ground rest after it has yielded the harvest. Some very fertile land can produce yields for three or four years before it needs to lie fallow. We do not use any fertiliser. Our grandparents used to use animal dung on the fields.

The main problem over the loss of trees is that the herdsmen cut them down for animal fodder and we do not know where to find saplings with which to replace them. Trees growing wild in Mara include tamarind, silk cotton trees and ndain.

Fishing
Our grandparents used to make fishing nets such as kabra, mbende and soro, but now we use modern ones. At the moment there is not much water, so there are fewer fish. We catch pike, silure, capitaine; different kinds of fish at different times. Carp is the only one that can always be found. You have to wait for the river to be very high before you can catch big fish such as nyinr, wouya, ngonr, kaou and youa.

Most fishing is done with the aid of a canoe. The way to fish without using a boat is to dig a hole a short distance from the river, channelling water into it. Fish which swim into this cannot get back to the river and are caught.

We sell the fish at the market. As there is a lot of silure at the moment, we sell it quite cheaply, but we charge quite a high price for pike. The women, who are responsible for selling the fish, first preserve and store some for future use, and then sell what remains. Some women also fish themselves.

Most people quench their thirst with river water, although there is one tap. The river water is boiled, cooled and then poured into a jar. We have been given a great deal of advice, verbal and practical. We have been taught how to avoid certain dangers and if people do the wrong thing, they are severely punished.

We have no means of knowing why it is hot or cold. Only God knows about these things. People these days seem to be incapable of accepting rain when there is rain, and heat when it is hot. In the old days, our grandfathers prayed for rain and it rained, or if the river was dangerously
high, they prayed for a drop in the level, and there was one. They accepted what God offered. Nowadays, it seems even children have become disobedient. A young boy will threaten you, shaking his fist. There is no understanding anything any more.

Our life is harder than it used to be but we manage by working together. Our community is divided into two groups, Muslims and Christians, and when we worship the Muslims cannot join with us, nor we with them. Among us Christians, if one of our brothers suffers some misfortune, we consult together at church and each will give what he can to help the person in difficulties. In such circumstances our Muslim brothers also give us financial help—there is a general readiness to help one another. It is just that we have different traditions.
Country Profile: SUDAN

Human Development Index (UNDP): 143rd out of 160 nations
Life expectancy at birth (1990): 50.8 years
Population per doctor (1984): 10,100
Adult literacy (1985): male 39%; female 10%
Labour force employed in agriculture (1985-1988): 65%
GDP from agriculture and livestock (1988/89): 36%
Principal exports: cotton, sesame, gum arabic, sorghum, sheep and lambs