

"man the fisher": salmon fishing and the expression of community in a rural Irish settlement

LAWRENCE TAYLOR—*Lafayette College*

This article treats the relation of fishing to the expression of communal relations in Teelin, a small coastal settlement in county Donegal, Ireland. Beyond presenting the ethnographic aspects of an as yet undescribed type of maritime pursuit, this paper offers (1) an explanation of the cultural prominence of a part-time economic activity and (2) an analysis of the implications of this fishing activity for the character of ongoing local interaction. While thus principally concerned with fishing, the argument is relevant to the analysis of any such collective pursuit.

For several hundred years a fishing/farming community, the people of Teelin make their living today in a variety of ways, many of which are typical to similar small-farmer settlements throughout the west of Ireland. One feature of the local economy that is of less wide distribution is the estuarine salmon fishery. From April to August the attentions and/or efforts of most locals are turned toward their estuary, to whose waters schools of salmon return in that season to spawn. Typically sold rather than eaten, the salmon is pursued by various techniques in Donegal Bay and along the coast. Most often, however, "he" (as the salmon is called) reaches the protected waters of the estuary, where 16 or so open rowboats, each crewed by 3 to 6 men, wait patiently for a sign of "his" coming. The fish are netted in a purse seine, the extent of the catch varying widely from boat to boat and net-throw to net-throw. Even with the high prices currently paid for salmon, only a few households earn substantial profits in this pursuit. Thus, while monetary gain is most certainly a motive for individual fishermen, the cultural prominence of the fishery rests on more than its economic function.

This paper analyzes the significance of the summer salmon fishery of Teelin, a small coastal settlement in county Donegal, Ireland. Although not of great economic importance to most Teelin families, the salmon pursuit is the subject of considerable cultural attention, providing a source of communal and personal identity. An explanation for the disproportionate cultural strength of the fishery is sought in its contribution to the maintenance of the local community as a bounded social entity in a region where historical disincorporations have made the existence and nature of such communities problematic. The ways in which the interactional and experiential aspects of this fishery contribute to Teelin's "local culture" are examined as a sample case of the relation between any such socially definitive activity and the structure of a local system of social relations or ideology. [community, European ethnography, maritime anthropology, Ireland, ideology]

Copyright © 1981 by the American Ethnological Society
0094-0496/81/040774-15\$2.00/1

the hearth of the lonely farm is the only center. There is no community centering upon town or village; there is only a double network of kinship connection and neighborly connection to hold together, loosely, people who dwell separate from one another. . . . In this rural countryside there are hamlets, three or four houses together, but there are not unifying centers of any delimitable rural group.

Indeed, county Clare, as described by Arensberg and Kimball (1968 [1940]:273), fits this farmstead-centric pattern fairly well and is possessed of communities only in the very relative sense described above.

The dispersed settlement pattern and undivided inheritance of the family farm, which are the bases of this social pattern in rural Ireland, are relatively recent phenomena in the west. Up until the middle of the 19th century, the standard settlement form had been the *clachan*³ (cluster), a nucleated hamlet with corporately owned land and rotating usufruct (Evans 1942). Beginning with the famine of the late 1840s, many "improving landlords" actively dispersed homesteads, consolidated holdings, and enforced undivided inheritance. Thus, local communities were effectively disincorporated in both a geographical and economic sense. There were, however, areas in the west of Ireland where various factors somewhat mitigated the effects of these elsewhere drastic changes (Taylor in press). In such regions, geography limited the degree to which settlements could be dispersed, so that land reforms left loosely nucleated but often fairly "contained" groups of households. The six townlands of Teelin, wedged between river and mountain on the Donegal coast, fit this pattern. Thus, geography made for a relatively delimited settlement where farms remained smaller and houses closer together than in county Clare.

If propinquity is a necessary condition to the maintenance of a local community, it is not, however, a sufficient one. In the absence of corporate land, the herring and cod fisheries provided Teelin with an important shared economic, social, and ideological base throughout the 19th century. These sea fisheries greatly diminished through the course of this century, however, leaving Teelin with less and less in the way of corporate ownership or enterprise (Taylor 1977).

The salmon has leaped, as it were, into this communal void. Although "he" has been taken in the estuary from time immemorial, the salmon has always been the jealously guarded property of various local elites. Although landlord ownership of river and estuary rights extended long past the founding of the Free State in 1923, close control over the river relaxed after the landlord left the area in the "troubles" following the 1916 uprising. The amount of salmon fishing rose steadily over the ensuing decades, though still illegal on "the private property" of the now absentee owner. In 1959, a national nonprofit agency purchased the estate and water rights and ushered in a period of licensed access to salmon. Since then, the fishery has attracted the open involvement of the local populace and increased in relative importance. As I have said, the price for salmon is high but only a few families are able to make sizable sums of money in the contemporary pursuit. For Teelin as a whole, the importance of the fishery is more social than economic. As the ensuing account demonstrates, the salmon pursuit has provided a source of coherence for "the little community."

What are the particular experiential characteristics of fishing, in general, and of this local salmon pursuit, in particular? While it is often the subject of literary exposition, the fishing experience per se is only rarely treated by anthropologists. Recent scholarly interest has typically been in the economic or social-structural features of local fisheries (e.g., Anderson 1972).⁴ Faris's (1972) examination of the idiomatic role of the sea and fishing in a Newfoundland outport, and Fox's (1978) exploration of the Tory Islander's dramatic confrontation with the high seas, are significant deviations from this tendency. As to the reason for the cultural significance of fishing in the mixed economy of Tory Island, Fox (1978:130) remarks,

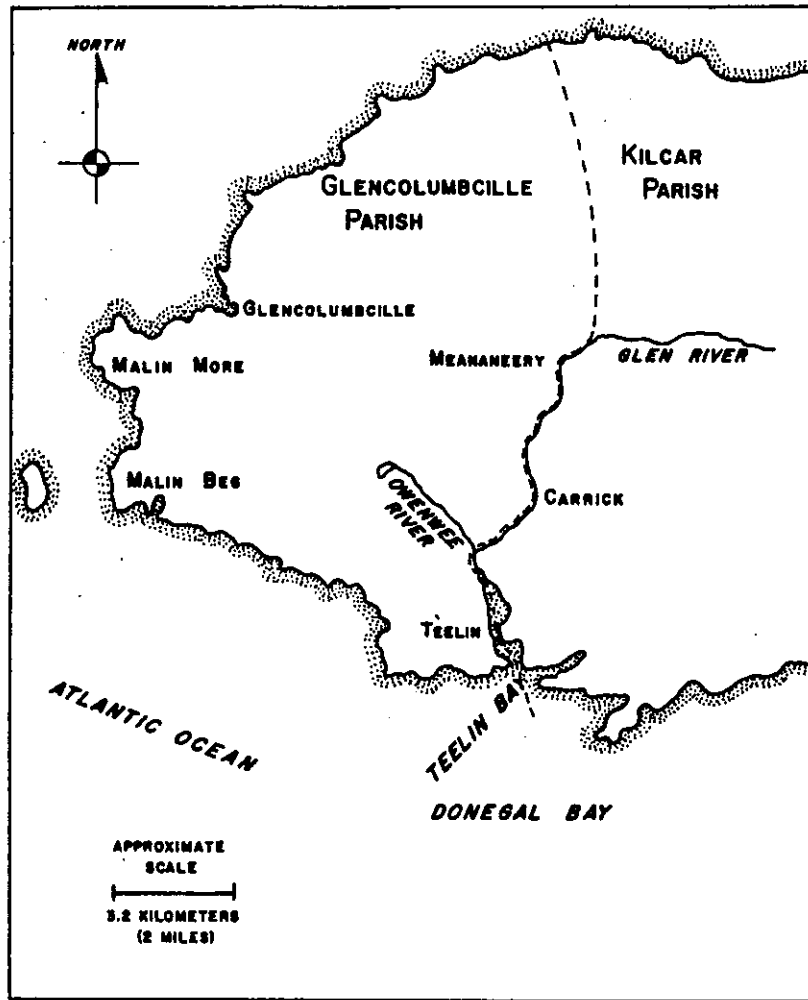


Fig. 1. Teelin's surrounding region.

clear view of the estuary and the events that transpire thereon. Thus, topography and shared resources conspire to identify Teelin with her waters. Insofar as the waters are in use, we may expect this identification to enjoy some importance.

Today, the average Teelin family continues to occupy a small farm of five or six acres, of which only one or two are arable land. On these are grown hay for winter feed and potatoes and vegetables for the household. The remaining land is left as rough pasture, supporting one or two cows. With few exceptions, households do not produce much of an agricultural surplus, and cash is still mainly sought elsewhere. All that remains of the once substantial winter herring fishery are two or three small craft. Now, the most ubiquitous source of income is government assistance money—the "dole." Since the 1960s, however, jobs have been available in several local cooperative industries, such as a fish factory 10 km. to the north and a nearby knitwear factory. More important are the jobs provided by the now booming fishing industry in Killybegs, 32 km. down the coast. Fish-processing plants and a few trawlers give work to many Teelin men and some women. Several families practice trades, and many of the young and old women of the community knit woolen sweaters on consignment for local shops. Wage labor in local factories is a recent phenomenon, and hence an experience limited to the young. The old, on the other hand, tend to confine their

tion," coincides with the summer, and the happy associations of the two are inextricably mixed in the local consciousness. As Brody (1972) argues, the summer is the social season in the contemporary west of Ireland. The agricultural cycle may have its lull in winter, but farming is no longer as important as it once was. Today, save for a brief respite at Christmas, winter is not looked forward to as a time of relaxation from the labors of farm and water. For young people who are still in some sense resident in the community, winter is the time of working in Killybegs in fish-processing plants or, less often, on the seagoing trawlers. Many of their friends and relatives have returned to England, and entertainment is sought at the parish hall dances held at various market towns throughout the season. Such youths lucky enough to have friends with cars pile in and drive great distances over mountain roads to dance to one of the several country-and-western and/or rock bands that play at such functions.

Sedentary seniors are not inclined to welcome the onset of winter either. "The days are getting shorter," one old man commented as we made our way up the road to the village pub one autumn evening, "and it won't be long 'til they're all away." Conversations in each other's cottages during the blustery winter are likely to be punctuated by long silences and often dwell on emigrated or deceased kin, concluding with *agus ta ouigneas ann anois* (and there's loneliness in it now). The few gathering sites of the community are empty, as the men are more prone to go up the road a few kilometers to the more comfortable pubs of the market town of Carrick than to suffer the cold and isolation of their own less well ac-coutered pub. Thus, though not as totally bleak as the picture of rural Ireland drawn by Brody, Teelin in winter is certainly quiet and rather atomistic.

Summer presents a dramatically different picture. The youth are home, the late setting sun and milder weather bring many out for evening strolls, and the local pub in Cappagh townland attracts a fair number of fishermen. Many emigrated children return from England or other parts of Ireland for vacation visits, and each is made for that time the center of curiosity and attention. In July and August the abandoned schoolhouse becomes an "Irish College," filled with children from the six counties of Northern Ireland who have come to the *Gaeltacht* (Gaelic-speaking area) for emersion in the Gaelic language and culture. Although occasionally mischievous, these youngsters and their teachers provide more entertainment than annoyance. While they may shake their heads at the "sorry way" in which their ancient tongue is served by these well-meaning visitors, most Teeliners are happy for the diversion and income provided by boarding these students, and the incidence of spoken Irish in the community does seem to increase in the summer. There is, as well, a more or less constant flow, though never a torrent of foreign tourists throughout the summer. Once again, much local interest is taken in any "character" who remains long enough to give local oral artists a chance to fix their talents on his idiosyncracies.

These factors, of course, are not at all peculiar to Teelin and may be said to characterize the tenor of life in much of the west of Ireland, where seasonal differences are striking. What is interesting about Teelin, this article argues, is the way in which the salmon fishery is able to provide a communal focus for this general social and psychological uplift. As we shall see below, the fishery adds a dimension to the return of kin that is missing in other areas where no such communal economic pursuit exists. It generally provides for contexts which not only affect individual experience and the general social atmosphere, but draw distinct lines that define the local community as a bounded social field.

The "community" of Teelin, dispersed overseas and ill defined at home through most of the year, is re-created each summer for the duration of the fishery. Nearly every able-bodied man will take part, whether returning for a two-week vacation from laboring in Manchester or taking a longer break of four to eight weeks from slack-season fish-plant work. Salmon fishing, visiting home, and general enjoyment are so necessarily linked in the minds of returning kin as to be virtually inseparable notions: "I'm home for a visit, for the

The other central "institution" in question is the house of "John Mór" just to the west of the pub. This house is also called "The Parliament," in reference to its nightly gatherings of men from all over Teelin.⁶ While men gather in this house the year round, it is in the summer months that it functions as a social center for the older men of the community. After a night's drinking in the pub, many will simply reseat themselves along the long bench or on scattered kitchen chairs in this house. There, a highly structured "argument," led by one particularly charismatic old fisherman, will serve to bring the significant fishing events of the past into a nightly confrontation with those of the present.

It can be seen that the ideological role of the fishery is fundamentally linked to its place in the overall social flux of the community. Entirely different sorts of pursuits, of course, might perform similar functions elsewhere in Ireland, though anthropological accounts have not indicated any such definitive activity elsewhere. The salient fact that the salmon fishery has indeed played this particular role in Teelin and, therefore, in our pursuit of anthropological interest, presents us with a case study of the effects of a particular experiential form on local social consciousness.

the fishery

We turn now to the actual conduct of the fishery. The strength of the salmon pursuit as an expression of communality, so apparent in its annual "ritual rebirth," rests on the degree to which the fishery is a shared experience. In this respect, the salmon pursuit surpasses even the sea fisheries of the past, for it is not only the fishermen who take an important part in the events of the season. I have described Teelin's settlement topography as "arenalike," and the sporting simile was chosen advisedly. Unlike any sea fishing, the predominantly estuarine salmon pursuit takes place before the very eyes of the entire community. Thus, all Teeliners, male and female, are the potential audience of what I have described as a "spectator sport." Several of the qualities of a "sport" thus characterize the events of the daily fishery.

The competitive and cooperative aspects of the "game," as well as the acceptance of a set of rules, are more pronounced than they can possibly be in any sea fishery for two reasons: (1) the technical exigencies of the salmon pursuit, and (2) its social context. Although three Teelin vessels "drifted" for salmon in 1976 in the inshore waters of Donegal Bay, the greatest number of boats and fishermen are in the estuarine fishery. There are, effectively, three ecological zones (see Figure 2) utilized within and immediately outside the estuary. On the coast outside the harbor mouth, "bag-nets," L-shaped nets with a translucent bag in the "crotch," are attached to the rocks and tended by one or two men whenever weather permits. Inside the estuary, two styles of fishing are practiced, one in *an cuan* (the bay) and the other farther upstream, in the river (see Figure 2).

In the bay, fishing is pursued by a method of medieval, if not ancient, provenance. A rowboat of about 6 m. is used, with a crew of from five to seven men. The craft sits a few meters off one of the *dul* points (fishing spots), with all but one of the crew members sitting in the boat and staring in all directions, waiting for a sign of approaching salmon. The remaining man is a "shoreman" who holds the other end of the rope leading from the net in the boat to the shore. His task is to adjust the length of the line so that the net in the drifting boat is always connected to the shore by a relatively taut line. When a salmon is sighted within a certain distance of the boat, the crew rows furiously around the fish, casting the net in a circle. As the net is pulled up onto the boat, the bottom draws together, forming an enclosed bag or purse that traps the salmon within.

The narrower river is also fished by rowboat and seine-net crew, but with variations that are a function of the different ecological conditions. The river is narrow and shallow, and a smaller boat and crew are used. A punt of about 5 m. is used, along with a shallower and

Fishing in this zone is limited, however, to Teeliners. Although they claim there is nothing to prevent "far-siders" from fishing these spots, no one can remember any ever doing so. One possible reason for this is that the "far-side" townlands that border this portion of the waterway are not much concerned with fishing. And since there is no "larger community," "far-siders" might be hesitant to fish on the shore of townlands other than their own. This does not restrict Teeliners, who operate as a single community in respect to fishing, from paying little (if any) attention to townland borders. If they did intrude into the river fishery, "far-siders" would certainly be putting further strain on what has become, in the past few years, a fiercely competitive ground.

The major mode of "far-side" salmon fishing has been the bag-net on the seacoast. While only two Teelin crews had these "fixed engines" in 1976, "far-side" nets virtually studded the coast on both sides of the harbor mouth. A balance between the exploitation of these two groups was thus achieved. In recent seasons, however, several bag-nets have been set by "far-siders" inside the bay. Since this made the positions so used unavailable to "ring-seine" crews, and since a fixed net could hardly participate in the rotation system, Teelin fishermen were outraged by this infringement of their communal rules. Their reaction is telling in several respects. As in most local conflicts, open confrontation was avoided and the Teelin fishermen simply slashed the offending nets at night. When this did not suffice as a deterrent, conservators were telephoned. With the complicity of the members of one local community, these officials made one of their rare successful raids.

Conflict between Teeliners and neighboring fishermen is thus mainly avoided by separation. Although operating in close proximity to one another, the two groups of fishermen tend to exploit different ecological niches requiring different technologies, playing, in effect, two separate games. Insofar as these distinctions hold, they serve to reinforce the identification of a fisherman with his community. Many Teelin fishermen, for example, characterize bag-net fishing as "a lazy way of fishing," thus implicating their "far-side" neighbors for whom this is the standard mode. In those instances where overlap does incur conflict, the distinction between communities becomes even more hostile and apparent in the means of resolution, as described above. Competition between Teelin fishermen can also erupt into conflict. When it does, however, offenders can be effectively censured by public opinion. As with any "spectator sport," the fishing "audience" is interested in observing the moral qualities, as well as the physical skills, of the contestants. Possibilities for conflict between Teelin fishermen are strongest on the river (see Figure 2).

The *dul* rotation system also operates on the river, where the difference in the efficacy of the positions is more pronounced. In this case, the positions constitute a virtual queue stretching upstream. The crew at the head of the line has the first strike at the approaching salmon and so is usually in the best place. If they do throw a *dul* (meaning, in this usage, a cast of the net), they typically go to the "end of the line" and everyone moves up one position. During any one day this procedure will be followed without difficulty, but there is some ambiguity at nightfall. Since boats quit the river at different times, there may be some confusion as to who has thrown the last *dul*. If a crew is in a good position but has not yet made a cast, they are entitled to take up the same place on the following day; if they have thrown a *dul*, it is of course the next crew's turn. However, a crew left alone in the growing dark might cast a net secretly and maintain on the next day that they had not yet had an opportunity to do so. Considering how closely most river fishing is observed by spectators, it is difficult to imagine a crew successfully lying about these matters. One did, however, attempt such deception, and the result was a brief but angry argument between the two crews concerned, as well as much hushed whispering about the "greed that salmon brings out in a man." Because verbal abuse of this sort is effective as a control within the community, there was no recourse to any external forces, as with the dispute between Teeliners and "far-siders."

conclusion

As is evident from the preceding discussion, an understanding of the cultural significance of Teelin's salmon fishery requires an analysis of its social context and characteristics. In that respect, the dominant cultural role of fishing is reminiscent, for example, of the !Kung concern with hunting. These hunter-gatherers may rely most heavily on vegetable food, but the virtues of the Mongongo nut seem relatively unsung (Lee 1968). Hunting is in many ways a more socially interactive pastime, and this fact, along with certain obvious experiential characteristics, has made it a better candidate for cultural attention and self-identification. There are also those East Africans who, like the Iraqw, are nicely described by Winter (1978:53) as agriculturalists who think they are pastoralists, because cattle remain particularly embedded in their social organization.

In the same vein, the typical Teeliner farms a small holding, works in a factory or at a trade, and may spend only 8 or 10 weeks of the year on the water. If asked what it is he "does," however, he will call himself *an iascaire*, (a fisherman). Insiders and outsiders alike know the community as *Teilinn an Eisc* (Teelin of the fish).

In the recurring season and nonrepetitive events of the salmon fishery, the bounds and rules of the local community are uniquely manifest. Insofar as Teelin is a social entity, fishing is thematic to its existence, for the strength of the fishery's communal role may be partly a function of the weakness of local definition in most other aspects of daily life. Teelin has no political status and can boast no local representative of any regional or national hierarchy; the local curate is in Carrick and the county council sits many miles to the north in Lifford. The community enjoys a name and an existence, however, that are joined together in the phrase *Teilinn an Eisc*. Historically, Teelin was created through fishing (Taylor in press), and today it is re-created annually for the duration of the salmon season.

This annual re-creation of the community is the current experiential anchor of a "fishing idiom." It provides the occasions that generate particular oral forms, such as the competitive events of the estuarine fishery. The form of the fishery also supports such social contexts for their expression as shore-side crowds and "the parliament." In that the incidents and experiences of the salmon pursuit are very different from those of the sea fishery, oral forms that are peculiar to salmon fishing now tend to dominate conversation and argument. These forms are exemplified by (though by no means limited to) humorous observations, such as that of Tomás concerning "Ger-a-man sub-marines," or the proverbial advice that "perseverance kills fish."

The idiomatic forms of the old sea fishery may survive as well. Older men, raised in the sea fisheries, today kill salmon and choose to perceive a basic continuity of communal experience through a period of extensive social change. The performance of the *seanchaidhe* (storyteller) is now rare, and thus the use of seafaring folktales is limited. Historical incidents of sea fishing, either witnessed or learned, are often brought to bear on current topics of debate in pub or "parliament." The winner of an argument is very often the man who is able to recall, with close attention to detail, the greatest number of past events bearing on the subject of the debate. The subject, however, is always one of contemporary interest. Current events supply the topic and historical anecdotes are offered as aids to interpretation; the past is recalled only insofar as it is relevant to the present.

The events that contribute to the personal and social identity changes described in this article are myriad, including, as I have said, returning kin, occasional tourists, and, indeed, even better weather. Salmon fishing is instrumental in this context insofar as it focuses these diverse elements into a definition of the local community. It must be stressed that the term "community" is not used loosely to mean a general increase in social interaction; rather, the term refers to a *bounded* social field with distinct, and in fact competitive,

"cooperative." The psychological and sociological impact of competition and conflict is most elegantly handled by Campbell (1964), in a European context, in the case of the Sarakatsani of Greece.

references cited

- Anderson, Raoul, and Cato Wadel, eds.
1972 *North Atlantic Fishermen*. St. John's: Memorial University Press.
- Arensberg, C., and Solon Kimball
1968 [1940] *Family and Community in Ireland*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Brody, Hugh
1972 *Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Campbell, John
1964 *Honour, Family and Patronage*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Evans, E. E.
1942 *Irish Heritage*. Dundalk: Dundalgan Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E.
1940 *The Nuer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Faris, J.
1972 *Cat Harbour*. St. John's: Memorial University Press.
- Fox, Robin
1978 *The Tory Islanders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, Richard B.
1968 *What Hunters Do for a Living, or, How to Make Out on Scarce Resources*. In *Man the Hunter*. R. B. Lee and I. DeVore, eds. pp. 30-48. Chicago: Aldine.
- McCourt, D.
1971 *The Dynamic Quality of Irish Rural Settlement*. In *Man and His Habitat*. R. Buchanan, E. Jones, and D. McCourt. pp. 126-164. New York: Barnes and Noble.
- MacGabhann, Mici
1959 *Rotha Mor an tSaoil*. Baile atha Cliath: Foilseachain Naisunta Tta.
- O'Heochaidh
1955 *Sean-Chainnt Theilinn*. Dublin: Institute of Advanced Studies.
1966 *Seanchas lascaireachta agus farraige*. *Bealoideas* 36:1-95.
- O'Neil, Sean
1975 *The Irish Placenames of Glencolumbkille Parish*. Ph.D. dissertation. Belfast: The Queen's University.
- Redfield, Robert
1960 *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Simmel, Georg
1955 *Conflict and the Web of Group-Affiliations*. Kurt H. Wolff and Reinhard Bendix, trans. New York: Free Press.
- Taylor, Lawrence
1977 *Teelin of the Fish: Fishing and Community in Southwest Donegal*. Ph.D. dissertation. Anthropology Department, SUNY Stony Brook.
in press *Colonialism and Community Structure in Western Ireland*. *Ethnohistory*.
- Van Gennep, Arnold
1960 *The Rites of Passage*. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wagner, Heinrich
1959 *Gaeilge Theilinn*. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies.
- Winter, Edward
1978 *Cattle-raiding in East Africa, with Special Attention to the Iraqw*. *Anthropology* 2(1):53-59.

Submitted 2 November 1979

Revised version received 6 June 1980

Revised version received 21 November 1980

Accepted 7 April 1981