

The Sociology of Insecurity: Cattle Rustling and Banditry in North-Western Kenya

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Abstract

The study analyses new forms of banditry and cattle rustling in north-western Kenya. These phenomena involve both inter and intra-ethnic as well as cross border raids for livestock. The practice is causing great havoc in the area in terms of loss of human lives, destruction of property, stealing of livestock and dislocation of populations. The new forms of violence seem to be the result of multiple cracks in the administrative structures of the state and social norms. The government of Kenya seems to have lost effective control over north-western Kenya, especially with regard to bandits and cattle rustlers, who have become more militarised and destructive in their operations. The study posits that the roots of these new forms of violence and insecurity can be found in social, cultural, economic, political and historical factors.

The study seeks to establish that banditry and cattle rustling are serious threats to internal security, rule of law and democratic governance, which are so vital for political pluralism in Kenya. It is the understanding of these new

tendencies and their relative importance, amidst challenges of globalisation, which is central to any research on violence, conflict and conflict resolution in Eastern Africa.

Part one of the paper provides a historical background of the pastoral economy and cattle rustling since pre-colonial times. Part two discusses the causal factors of new forms of banditry and cattle rustling. Although most of these factors can be traced to the colonial era, the main focus is on the worsening situation in the last twenty years or so. Part three summarises the socio-economic and political impact of banditry and cattle rustling. In the conclusion, the paper provides a compressed discussion and offers some possible solutions to the banditry and cattle rustling menace.

Introduction

There has emerged a new system of predatory exploitation of economic resources in the form of banditry and cattle rustling (raids) in Kenya. This problem is manifesting itself in various forms and it is becoming endemic in north-western Kenya. Traditionally, cattle rustling among the pastoral communities was considered as a cultural practice and was sanctioned and controlled by the elders. However, currently the phenomenon of cattle rustling is causing great concern. In the past there has been a tendency by scholars to trivialise the issue of cattle rustling as a mere cultural practice. Yet, over a period of time there have emerged new trends, tendencies and dynamics, leading to commercialisation and internationalisation of the practice. It is the deciphering of these trends and tendencies which forms the *locus standi* for this paper. The study therefore tackles the following key issues:

- Why have banditry and cattle rustling been exacerbated since the 1980s?
- Why is the banditry and cattle rustling menace concentrated in the border lands?
- What is the link between cattle rustling and the prevailing economic situation in the country?
- Who are the perpetrators of banditry and cattle rustling?

To a large extent it is the general view that the cattle rustling phenomenon has undergone fundamental transformation from a cultural practice of testing a person's personal bravery and prowess to bloody warfare between various groups. All these pose serious challenges to societal structures, survival, as



well as moral foundations (Salih 1992:29).

In this paper the term “pastoralism” is used to denote a practice whose main ideology and production strategy is the herding of livestock on an extensive base or in combination with some form of agricultural activity. The terms “rustling” and “raiding” are used interchangeably to refer to armed attacks by one group on another with the purpose of stealing livestock and not necessarily territorial expansion (Markakis 1993:124).

It is the understanding of these new tendencies and their relative importance which is central to any research on the banditry and cattle rustling phenomena. The different trends and tendencies operate differently from one locality to another in terms of degree and impact, although to a large extent all have contributed to the state of violence and lawlessness in north-western Kenya. This therefore calls scholars to decipher and distinguish these tendencies of conflict and violence and to comprehend their varying significance, implication and relationship. It is only after such qualitative distinctions are discerned that objectivity and not emotionalism can be applied in the understanding of the twin phenomena of banditry and cattle rustling.

In order to address a general sociology of insecurity in Africa, it is necessary that the saga of increased conflicts in specific regions be opened up for inspection, hence the genesis of this study. This will make it possible for such conflicts to be soberly addressed, considered and revisited where necessary. This may help us in unearthing and understanding the germane causal factors of these conflicts and link them to an understanding of the predatory exploitation of economic resources in Africa.

1. Historical background of pastoral economy and cattle rustling

The marginalisation of the pastoralists

The existence of pastoralists in north-western Kenya is under intolerable stress and they are involved in a violent struggle to survive. In the literature, there are three types of pastoralism. They are distinguished by “the basis of land use and whether the pastoralists are mounted or pedestrian: mounted flat land nomads, pedestrian flat land nomads and mountain dwelling pastoralists” (Khan 1994:198). Various forms of pastoral systems react differently to changes in the ecological, environmental and economic situations. Pastoral systems are by and large products of climatic and environmental factors. In

most parts of the pastoral areas crop rotation is difficult if not impossible due to the extremely dry weather conditions. In Kenya the existence of these pastoralist groups is threatened by droughts, famine and violent conflicts. They are a powerless, pauperised and victimised community. What went wrong?

To a large extent droughts and famines, as well as competition for resources have led to the steady marginalisation of the pastoralists. According to Van Zwaneberg, the present precarious position of the East African pastoralists should not be viewed simply as that of societies that have lagged behind in the field of development or that have rejected change. In the early nineteenth century the pastoralists were the dominant force in East Africa, but today these societies are dominated, underprivileged and impoverished (Van Zwaneberg & King 1975: ch 1).

In Kenya the material bases of the pastoralists' economy have been disrupted and they can no longer subsist from their herds. Social relationships can no longer be maintained through the traditional systems. In other words, the traditional morality has collapsed following a rupture in the structure of social relationship on which people's lives were hinged (Markakis 1993:147).

According to Baxton "a person stripped of stock is stripped of the most active social relationship and thereby of selfhood and self-respect; so it is no wonder that almost every one strives to keep some livestock and those fortunate few who have incomes from trade and regular employment continue to invest in stock" (Markakis 1993:148).

Aronson, on the other hand, argues that pastoralists operate a multi-resource economics:

Throughout their history pastoralists have engaged in a multiplicity of economic activities, making use of a wide diversity of resources within their reach and often modifying their animal production to the demands of other pursuits. Above all they farm a bit, they also trade, they handicraft, they smuggle, they used to raid and make war on their own or for others and they managed the labour of others working for them.

(Odegi-Awuondo 1992:9)

Pastoralists raise different types of livestock with different levels of drought and feed shortage sensitivity. The characteristics of the animals and the environmental conditions faced by the pastoralists determine the number and composition of the herds. Pastoral production systems are by and large a product of climatic and environmental factors. The objective of the pastoralist



is to accumulate and maintain as much wealth as possible in terms of livestock. The pastoralists have been able to eke out a living from the harsh and unpredictable environment for centuries. In their long history livestock provided not only a valuable source of food but also acted as a wealth reserve, a redeemer from damage, a sacrificial gift and a means of marriage and other ceremonial payments (Salih 1992:27).

The Pokot are the most pastoral section of the Kalenjin cultural groups. Historically they are related to the Maasai cluster and the Ateker. According to the 1989 population census the Kalenjin numbered 2,5 million out of which 220,000 were Pokot (Markakis 1993:87). Due to the semi-arid and fragile eco-system of northern Kenya only pastoralism can be effectively practised. Various strategies have been adopted by the pastoral communities to cope with the environmental stresses that periodically occur.

Odegi-Awuondo (1992:44) contends that the root cause of socio-economic problems among the Turkana today can be traced to the disruptive and inimical policies of the colonial government in their attempt to pacify the Turkana. In their response the Turkana built up a strong armed resistance and continued to defy colonial order between 1895 and 1925. By 1900 they had evolved an effective system for the universal mobilisation of young men into well-drilled corporate units. This made it possible for the Turkana to resist for nearly twenty-five years the imposition of colonial hegemony over them. Initiations were partly linked to raiding activities, as the new initiates wanted to prove their prowess and bravery. For example, to counteract British raids on them the Turkana in turn raided their loyal pastoral neighbours in order to restock their herds. However, in 1925 the Turkana were subdued and consequently pauperised through various government policies and actions (Odegi-Awuondo 1992:44). In 1989 the population of the Turkana was 200,000 (Markakis 1993:146).

In Kenya, following the establishment of colonial rule, the government adopted inimical policies which contributed to the economic and political marginalisation of the pastoral communities. The colonial government favoured the establishment of white settlers' plantation economy in the country at the expense of peasant production. Thus pastoralism was regarded by colonial officials as a primitive mode of production and efforts were made to discourage it. Such views were given credence and sanction by crude racist anthropologists who propagated myths about the sociological correlates of pastoralism such as conservatism and the so-called "cattle complex" (Galaty et al 1980:184-186). The government therefore demarcated tribal reserves for

African populations. This was aimed at making more fertile land available for alienation to white settlers. The creation of fixed borders did not only limit free access to grazing land and water, but also increased social conflict among the Africans. These borders hindered free movement of people and livestock. The pastoralists were adversely affected by these measures since their mode of nomadism results from ecological demands necessitating mobility to balance ecological heterogeneity (Ocan n.d.:7).

Due to their small territory the Pokot have remained the most ethnically cohesive society, and often their conflict for grazing area is about community survival. Most of the Pokot were made landless by the colonial administration and European settlers who pushed them out of the most fertile land into the drier parts. To a large extent, therefore, cattle raiding by the Pokot is both a natural response to disasters such as drought, and an attempt to increase the yields of their livestock by increasing their numbers in good season as an insurance against bad seasons. According to Ocan, colonialism made the political relations in the area worse because as access to land shrunk and populations of animals and people in restricted areas increased against available resources, acute competition for water and pasture between settlements became the only answer. Restricting movements, which was a fatal decision, meant that when animals of one group died, the only way to replenish stocks – the most natural and socially available to lowly developed social formations – was cattle raiding (Ocan n.d.:9).

In addition to border restrictions and movements control, the colonial government also imposed market taxes, quarantine, destocking campaigns, and other impediments. These measures made border trade difficult and less profitable. By the mid nineteenth century some of the communities in northern Kenya such as the Turkana and the Pokot had adopted transhumance, a settled form of pastoralism through which only animals are moved in search of pasture and water while the families settle “permanently” in given locations (Ocan n.d.:4).

The adoption of transhumance entailed the development of hostilities among the various groups over grazing grounds. Moreover, the loss of animals during droughts provided a justification for raiding to restock the herds. In that connection, the immediate response to stock shortages was to turn against another community and deplete its resources in order to replenish losses (Ocan n.d.:4). Dyson-Hudson discusses what he terms “aggressive confrontation” as an essential component of the pastoralists’ strategy (Markakis 1993:1). He points out that fighting to establish rights over



pastureland, water, and raiding to replenish depleted herds are accepted practices among the pastoral groups (Markakis 1993:1).

State repression

The pastoral people have had to contend with state repression since the colonial period. For example, northern Kenya was a closed district and was administered by military officers. Free movement in and out of the district was therefore restricted. This had negative effects on the social, economic and political developments of the pastoral communities. Whenever there occurred a cattle raid, the government would send punitive expeditions against the suspected ethnic group. Such expeditions led to the killing of many Africans, and confiscation of livestock. All such measures created strong resentment against colonial rule, and resulted in the tendency of rejecting all forms of Western influence for a long time.

Since ancient times pastoralism involved the protection of livestock from wild animals. Later on protection against human thieves also became necessary. These considerations therefore made it prudent for pastoralists to be armed. This was seen as a threat by the colonial authority, however. Pastoralists such as the Turkana and the Pokot were referred to as “war-like”. Fukui argues that the use of negative terms such as “war-like” and “violent” is a way of creating an enemy image and using it as an ideological justification for counter aggression (Markakis 1993:193). The government used this perception as a justification to put a close watch over the Turkana and the Pokot. The government officials and their African collaborators believed that the only way to deal with the cattle rustling menace was to use brute force.

The post-independence government seems to have adopted the same strategy in dealing with frequent cattle rustling activities in northern Kenya. However, despite the use of force the government has failed to achieve its objectives. Instead it has exacerbated the problem since the raiders have tended to acquire more sophisticated weapons than those of the government security forces. The bandits therefore are the *de facto* administrators of northern Kenya.

The increase in state brutality gained momentum in the 1980s when the pastoralists easily obtained deadly fire arms from the neighbouring countries which were undergoing political turmoil. This proliferation of arms could take place since the state had lost its monopoly of legitimate violence (*Africa Now* 1996). These weapons were acquired not only for defensive but for offensive purposes as well. Ocan notes that another impact of state repression is the

manner in which confiscated livestock are stolen by government officers. In that regard the plunder creates at one level a destitute and demoralised society and at another an armed and brutalised one. The people therefore see the gun as their saviour (Allen 1996:122).

During the 1970s the Turkana in collaboration with elements in the government employed sophisticated raiding methods using heavy guns, military trucks for transport and large scale networks of smuggling extending up to Sudan (Markakis 1993:89). After 1979, the Pokot and the Karamajong (Uganda) adopted similar military tactics. Consequently, from a means of obtaining a few animals and improving one's fighting prowess, raiding had evolved into military operations using conventional war tactics and involving thousands of livestock. Not only young men were killed, but women and children were brutally murdered as well. Huts, stores and harvests were set on fire and shops looted. The government's reaction was to send military helicopters to bombard the suspected bandits' hideouts, though without much success. The government also put renewed emphasis on the policy of depastoralisation. The government's military and economic measures obviously failed to achieve the expected results. This was due to the fact that such measures were aimed at eradicating the symptoms rather than the root cause of the disease. As Dietz states:

Having lost all or most of the animals and being continuously threatened with physical extinction, leaves the men little choice, while women, children and the elderly are compelled to go to refugee camps or urban slums. Looting under cover of 'civil war' may be the crudest form of primitive accumulation. Although a risky strategy it often pays.

(Markakis 1993:95)

After all these years it can still be said, as Samatar has pointed out, that "the key to a mutually beneficial production relationship between the state and pastoralists has not yet been found" (Markakis 1993:110).

2. Casual factors of new trends in banditry and cattle rustling

Ecological impediments

The practice of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralism in Kenya is at a cross roads and many forces are ganged up against it. Will it survive? The robust



and adaptable customs of pastoralists have been placed under increasing strains by an unprecedented scale of ecological, social, and economic factors. The pastoralist understanding and response to ecological pressures were systematically eroded by colonialism. This was effected through the drawing of ethnic and national boundaries as well as by the restriction of cattle movements. These measures greatly affected the transhumant patterns already mastered by the pastoralists from their long experience with ecological hardships (Odegi-Awuondo 1992: ch 1).

The pressures resulting from colonial boundaries and perpetuated by the Kenyan post-colonial governments are clearly evident in the inter-group raids and conflicts along the borders. These fixed boundaries were drawn with little regard to seasonal variations and the needs of the people for pasture (Galaty et al 1980:145). Frequent meetings are held between administrators in Kenya and Uganda border districts on the issue of security and insecurity. For example, on 16 May 1990 the District Commissioner for Turkana wrote to his Ugandan counterpart of Moroto asking for an urgent meeting. The purpose of the May 17 meeting was to discuss the issue of cattle stolen by Kenyan cattle rustlers who took refuge in Uganda. The meeting was also to discuss the matter of a rifle, which was stolen from a Ugandan soldier and was believed to be in the hands of a criminal who was at large in Kenya (Ocan n.d.:13).

Such meetings have become common, yet are unable to find a lasting solution to the banditry and cattle rustling menace. The attempt by pastoral societies to ignore the colonial boundaries and interpret them according to traditional ecology has exacerbated tensions between the pastoralists and the agricultural communities. During good rains livestock have enough pasture to eat. However when the rains fail and droughts occur animals are often taken to territories belonging to other clans or ethnic groups. This may lead to conflict. Very often the pastoralists destroy the crops on the farms. For example, such an incident led to serious ethnic conflict between the Samburu pastoralists and the Kikuyu in Laikipia district in February 1998 causing the death of 70 people (*Daily Nation* 13 Feb 1998).

In pre-colonial times pastoral societies used migrations as a panacea for droughts. But the imposition of boundaries destroyed this possibility, and was totally at variance with the understanding of boundaries by the pastoralists who responded to ecological demands. Consequently, massive deaths of cattle led to raids as one of the options of replenishing the depleted stocks (Ocan n.d., Odegi-Awuondo 1992). The major effect of the colonial policies which

restricted movement was the creation of demographic pressures. These reduced the ability of the pastoralists to sustain large herds. These inimical policies have continued under post-independence government.

Salih (1992:34) notes that the fact that most Sahelian borders are contested by states and pastoral groups is a clear indication that the state is largely ignored by these pastoralists in reaction to state marginalisation of their interests when national policies are discussed. Besides the socio-ecological factors, the pastoralists have to contend with natural calamities such as drought and famines. In Kenya serious droughts occur once every decade (Galaty et al 1980:144). The prevalence of this phenomenon has had adverse effects on animal production, and has often led to famines.

According to Mamdani “natural catastrophes no longer have equal impact; in a way they benefit some in terms of obtaining cheap labour and land, while causing destitution to others through loss of stock and land” (Ocan n.d.:14). Cattle raids often constitute a communal response to natural calamities, although it is a primitive survival strategy. As Ocan (n.d.:15) posits: “On the overall, raiding has the impact of creating a desperate cycle of continuous raids as each group in the region sees it as a means for re-stocking”.

Thus the social dilemmas created by frequent natural disasters appear to be the major catalysts of the cattle-rustling phenomenon in the borderlands. The predatory exploitation and misuse of the ecology trigger hostility and undermine security. The main losers in such conflicts are the poor peasants whose lives are tied to land and pasture.

To the pastoral groups the importance of livestock should not be underestimated. Goldschmidt correctly points out: One must remember that livestock, particularly cattle, are not merely a food resource; they are also capital, which is essential to all kinds of negotiations involving influence and alliance; they are not merely savings, they are the only form of investment available to tribal pastoralists (Galaty et al 1980:55).

To some extent the pastoral communities are characterised by inequalities in livestock distribution, with a small proportion of households in each category quite well off and much larger numbers of households in abject poverty. About 30% are below the minimum viable herd level of 5 units per household (*Human Organization* 1991).

By the 1950s the Boran were one of the wealthiest and productive pastoralist groups in East Africa, yet today the majority of the Boran lead a life of destitution, abject poverty and dependence on relief provision. According to Baxton (Markakis 1993:14), this state of affairs can be attributed



to two related factors. The Boran were victims of political miscalculated alliances and natural calamities – both of which contributed to the decimation of their stock. During the 1960s the Boran supported the Somali secessionist movement in northern Kenya. Consequently, their homeland was a battleground between government security forces and Somali bandits (shiftas). The government took punitive measures against the Boran, which caused heavy loss of human and animal lives. The proliferation of firearms along the borders between Kenya and Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia, and the inability of these states to control cross-border raids have created a situation of permanent insecurity in the borderlands (Markakis 1993:146).

Anders Hjort and Mohamed Salih show the linkage between political instability and ecological constraints and *vice versa* (Obi 1998). In north-western Kenya the incessant ecological conflict and insecurity have continued with catastrophic consequences. Such conflicts lead to environmental degradation, which in turn culminates in another cycle of conflict producing thousands of refugees.

Militarism

The government of Kenya appears to have lost effective control over bandits and cattle rustlers, who have become more militarised, predatory and destructive in their operations. The challenge to the state's monopoly of coercion and violence is evident in the privatisation of violence by the emergence of warlords for the purposes of predatory accumulation. Traditionally cattle rustling was a cultural practice and was regarded as a kind of sports among the pastoralists. It was controlled and had to be sanctioned by the elders. A significant amount of literature shows that guns did not play a prominent role in the military organisation of many East African pastoral and semi-pastoral communities (Mazrui 1977:4; Fukui & Markakis 1994:159).

Today, however, new forms of banditry and cattle rustling have emerged, over which the elders have no control. In the last two decades a number of pastoral societies have become militarised and increasingly rely on firearms.

Although cultural or social phenomena change over time, there still remains continuity in many respects. Historically, cattle raiding has undergone fundamental changes in terms of causes, effects and content. However, varying old tendencies of raids have survived while new ones have also emerged. Markakis (1993:13) argues that today conflicts among pastoralists have taken new, exaggerated dimensions. This he attributes to a shrinking resource base, which has provoked a desperate struggle for survival in which

the existence of some groups is threatened. This struggle is waged using new sophisticated firearms, and verges on ethnocide, where neither women nor children are spared. What has been said about war, that it can be seen as “one of the modes of destruction which varied in accordance with available technology” (Hutchful & Bathily 1998:11), is also applicable in this case.

These weapons have become vital to the pastoralists. They are invaluable for groups to remain in the pastoral economy and to defend their communities, since the government seems unable to provide security. Ironically, African governments, rather than resolving long-standing ethnic conflicts, have tended to provide weapons to one group to fight against another.

The new forms of violence are characterised by the commercialisation of banditry and cattle rustling. Dietz refers to this as the “crudest form of primitive accumulation” (Markakis 1993:13). Cattle rustling has pauperised thousands of pastoralists in East Africa, as one Ugandan newspaper states: “For without a gun, therefore without cattle in an ecology where cattle are the only answer in the immediate short run you cannot help being a pauper, a destitute” (*New Vision* 1990:8).

After 1979 the process of undermining pastoralism in Kenya gained momentum because of a combination of factors. First, cattle diseases wiped out most of the livestock. Secondly, a two-year drought caused harvest failure and famine. Thirdly, an upsurge in cattle raids and military attacks by heavily armed Karamajong and Turkana, collectively termed Ngorokos (bandits), took place. These bandits had sophisticated weapons which they had acquired from ex-president Idi Amin’s fleeing soldiers in Uganda. In 1984 to 1986 the Kenyan government sent a punitive military operation into the Pokot district, purportedly to seize illegal firearms. During the operation thousands of Pokot livestock were confiscated by the government while others died due to drought or lack of proper attention while in the hands of the security forces. The Pokot have never forgiven the government for this callous act against them and their livestock.

By the mid 1980s about 75% of the Pokot had no livestock left (Magut interview 1998) and they had to look for a new economic base. This included a combination of rudimentary agriculture, gold panning in the mountain streams, dependency on charity in the form of food aid from the missionaries and NGOs, casual labour in the market centres, and some other options. Nearly all the Pokot adopted in one way or another these short-term survival strategies to keep body and soul together. The government action can therefore be seen as evidence of attempted depastoralisation of the Pokot.



According to Fukui “the state does not simply affect warfare in the tribal zone by its presence or merely intervene in conflicts between third parties. The state itself is both the arena and a major contestant, when it is not the very object of conflict” (Markakis 1993:8).

According to Ocan (n.d.:2), initially cattle raids among the pastoral communities were a result of attempts by various groups to maximise herd sizes in order to ensure communal survival. Thus raiding entrenched the position of a given social group which could guarantee territorial area and means of survival. Raids therefore were a form of response by a society to disasters emanating from cattle diseases, famines and other forms of calamities. Another cause of cattle rustling which has become more entrenched in the last few decades is that of self-acquisition motives. Raids motivated by such tendencies do not occur as a response to ecological or natural calamities. Such raids occur at any time with the aim of acquiring animals for commercial purposes and individual gain. While the first category of raids hinges on communal interests and are monitored by the community through social norms, the latter is based entirely on private interests and are controlled by armed kraal (manyatta) leaders. This has led to the emergence of cattle warlords.

State officials, especially security forces, are also reportedly perpetrating acts of violence and insecurity in the region. Since the colonial period the state has been implicated in the confiscation of livestock belonging to the so-called recalcitrant tribes. Among the Pokot raiding is regarded as an economic necessity to increase the society’s herd, and thereby as a survival tactic. The Turkana on the other hand, attribute their present predicament to three factors (Odegi-Awuondo 1992). First, the breaking of an important cultural taboo regarding warfare. It is alleged that the Turkana had declared war on their elder brother, the Ngijie of Uganda. Secondly, a curse of Turkana elders due to inter-generational conflicts in the society. In the past under traditional norms, the elders under the system of gerontocracy were empowered to monitor cattle raids so as to make it a form of sport and not war. Thus raids and counter-raids had to be approved by the elders. However, several decades ago, the elders refused to sanction a raid, but the young warriors disobeyed them and went ahead. The elders, therefore, declared a curse on them saying that warfare would become a permanent feature in their lives. Lastly, the drought and famine catastrophes are blamed partially on the declining power of the traditional diviner (Emuron) due to the increasing influence of Christianity and western culture.

From antiquity warfare has been practised by man, though these confrontations had limits. As Salih (1992:24) points out:

... armed conflicts generally followed predictable patterns and were soon followed by pressures for a truce or a reconciliation. Killing was relatively limited partly because of the weapons used and partly because payment of compensation to aggrieved relatives could be expensive in terms of live-stock.

Fukui and Turton in their edited book (1979) argue that there are certain elements of social organisations which serve the “mid-wifery” role to heighten or lessen the intensity of conflict. They point out that warfare among the East African pastoralists “has more in common with raiding than with the large scale, set piece or pitched battles of European history” (Fukui & Markakis 1994:190). However at present there is emerging an increasing tendency towards the Europeanisation of war amongst the pastoralists, thereby narrowing the distinction between war and raiding. Fukui and Turton therefore point out that the distinction helps to differentiate two levels of armed conflict: “The first one is determined by socially accredited values and beliefs, while the other is an individual or small group act with limited or without societal approval” (Fukui & Turton 1979:191).

It is becoming clearly evident that there is a significant link between environmental conflict and insecurity in north-western Kenya. Despite denials by Euro-centric scholars there seems to be, as pointed out by Cyril Obi, some strong linkage between “unbridled capitalist exploitation and the degrading of the African ecosystem and the outbreak and reproduction of environmental conflict and resources wars in Africa” (Obi 1998). This argument is quite relevant to the present scenario in north-western Kenya, where profit-motivated cattle warlords are causing havoc using western made weapons, thereby creating a situation of permanent insecurity.

The politics of cattle warlordism

The weakening of state control over north-western Kenya has resulted in the emergence of cattle warlords with armed militia to protect their interests. Consequently violence, chaos and insecurity have become the dominant feature in the region. Cattle warlordism is a new phenomenon which has emerged among the Pokot and Turkana since the 1980s. Available evidence shows that the first warlord emerged in West Pokot in 1980. He mobilised a group of about 500 youths by promising them security and livestock. Most of the youth were recruited from the nearby trading centres where they were



eking out a living as night watchmen, farmhands, or by performing odd jobs. These young men underwent some vigorous military training under the supervision of ex-military men (Morogo interview 1998).

After undergoing the training the warriors were sent on raiding missions against the Tugen, Marakwet and Keiyo. Through several similar raids, the warlord and his retainers managed to replenish their stocks. Later more raids were organised further afield against the Turkana, Karamajong of Uganda, and Toposa of Ethiopia. Most of these raids yielded good results although there were also some casualties during combat. Since then more cattle warlords have emerged and warlordism has turned into a profitable venture for both the warlords and their retainers.

Influential and wealthy people have arisen promising the people good tidings, security and prosperity. Due to the people's disillusionment and anger over the government's mistreatment in the past, the warlords have managed to win strong support from the people for their own personal gains. The 1980s were characterised by natural calamities and compounded by a serious state of permanent insecurity created by bandits and to some extent by government security forces. Many families fled their homes and became refugees in the nearby trading centres. This was a serious blow to the pastoral activities of the Pokot and Turkana.

The warlords have created strong and heavily armed private armies which, apart from providing local security, also go on cattle raids, near and far. The warlords therefore have very many retainers whom they can send on raids, while they maintain and supervise the raiding party. The warlords have become the final authority on cattle relations, overriding the traditional powers of the elders. Available evidence shows that there are links between warlords and livestock traders from Kenya and neighbouring countries. They have maintained a strong trade network reminiscent of the old East African caravan trade (Morogo interview 1998).

The youth play a very crucial role in the system of warlordism. Since they are impoverished and marginalised by economic realities, the youths are structurally available and ready for mobilisation and for offering service to the highest bidder. In general, the youth are the group most excluded from the social, economic and political order of the society. They are amenable and can easily be manipulated.

The large number of destitute youths is due to the breakdown of social and economic order in north-western Kenya. Indeed, the appropriation of violence by the youth has had a serious effect on the traditional hierarchy in

the society, where the elders were expected to have some moderating influence over the activities of the abrasive youth.

In order to understand the politics of warlordism it is necessary to trace the political factors behind this new phenomenon.

In 1978 Mr Daniel arap Moi, the then vice president of Kenya, assumed the office of president following the death of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. Mr Moi comes from a small semi-pastoral community, the Tugen of Baringo district. Most of the pastoral communities welcomed the political changes, hoping that it would bring good tidings to them since their son was now head of state. They claimed that Kenyatta's government had ignored them in the distribution of the "fruits of independence" or national resources. The pastoralists therefore hoped to obtain favours in terms of economic and political dispensation from the new government. These high expectations have not been realised to a large extent, however.

New forms of banditry and cattle rustling sprung up in north-western Kenya, apparently perpetrated by warlords with different sinister motives. In Pokot District the warlords are allegedly led by a senior politician in the government of Kenya, who in the 1980s had been jailed for two years after conviction in a court of law for engaging in "warlike activities". Currently the bone of contention is the feeling by the Pokot that the government has taken them for granted for too long. Thus there are both political and economic dimensions to the new phenomena of cattle rustling and banditry.

Politically, like other pastoral communities in Kenya, the Pokot have been staunch supporters of the government and the ruling party. However, the Pokot to some extent are grumbling that they have been given a raw deal although they are part of the "KAMATUSA", a conglomeration of pastoral ethnic groups, currently ruling Kenya. According to this argument, there has been a tendency by the government to favour the Tugen-Keiyo axis in the distribution of political and economic resources. Furthermore, the Pokot are re-asserting the so-called historical claim to the fertile lands of Trans-Nzoia District. During the colonial era the district formed part of the Kenya White Highlands, an area which was reserved exclusively for European settlement.

Following the attainment of independence in 1963 the Highlands were made open to all racial groups. Thus a number of prominent African politicians, business men, and civil servants acquired huge tracts of land in the district from the former European owners, under the willing buyer and willing seller agreements. However, nearly all the new land owners are non-Pokot. It is worth noting that at the time of independence most of the Pokot had not



been exposed to Western education and influence, and thus they had not yet realised the value of acquiring agricultural land. In the last three years the Kenya government has been sub-dividing state farms in Trans-Nzoia District, mostly to the politically favoured individuals, the Tugen and the Keiyo, at the expense of the many landless Kenyans, including the Pokot. Ironically, according to the Pokot, most of the present inhabitants of the district are supporters of the opposition parties, hence they should be chased out of the district and their farms allotted to the Pokot and other pastoral groups (a sort of ethnic cleansing!).

Economically, Pokot district is underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure, resource allocations, and the availability of economic and social services. The Pokot therefore feel that they have been pushed to the wall and must react in one form or another to reassert themselves, safeguard their interests, and make the government accede to their various demands.

It is worth noting that the Kalenjin are not a single ethnic group. The name was coined in the 1950s by the elite of a conglomeration of small pastoral and semi-pastoral groups in the Rift Valley who speak closely related dialects (Ochieng 1980; Mwanzi 1977). This was a political move to make these small ethnic groups create some semblance of ethnic unity, which could enable them to have a stronger political bargaining power as independence was approaching. This political marriage of convenience of the Kalenjin groups therefore was not built on solid rock. It has started showing serious cracks in the form of tensions, dissension and disagreements over a multiplicity of issues. For example, the Nandi, who are the most populous society in the group, are complaining bitterly about their perceived marginalisation by the present government, purportedly led by a fellow Kalenjin. Some of their leaders are claiming that the Nandi were better off under Kenyatta's rule than they are today (*Daily Nation* 20-31 Dec 1998; *The East African Standard* 31 Dec 1998).

The Nandi argue that the maize, wheat and dairy industries on which their economy hinges have been destroyed by the government through state interference and corruption. In addition, they contend that they are not well represented in the government, which is dominated and controlled by the Tugen-Keiyo axis, who are a minority in the Kalenjin conglomeration.

Since the re-introduction of political pluralism in Kenya in 1991, ethnic conflicts have become the order of the day. Before conceding to internal or external pressure for political reforms, the government warned that multi-partyism would lead to violence, since Kenya was not a cohesive society. The

most populous ethnic groups in the country, such as the Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya and Abagusii, joined the newly formed political parties since they felt the government had marginalised them. Serious ethnic clashes started in late 1991 as Kenyans were preparing for the first multi-party general elections in 25 years. It has been claimed that the clashes were ostensibly organised by the government to forestall the widely expected electoral victory by the opposition. The violence pitted the Kalenjin on the one hand and the populous ethnic groups on the other. A total of about 2,500 people, the majority of whom were women and children, were killed in the ethnocide (Amnesty International 1993, *Daily Nation* 20 Mar; 6 June 1992). It is alleged that the perpetrators of the ethnocide had given special training to Kalenjin youths (warriors), who were later sent to various parts of the country to spearhead the ethnic violence. This involved the stealing or maiming of livestock, burning of food crops and houses, raping of women, and killing of people. The germane aim of the ethnic clashes was to punish the Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya and Abagusii ethnic groups, who were perceived as supporters of the opposition parties. There were claims that the warriors were promised one thousand Kenya shillings for every human victim killed (*Daily Nation* 22 Sept 1992; The Kiliku Parliamentary Committee Report 1992). A majority of the warriors were allegedly recruited from among the Keiyo ethnic group. They carried out their mission as per the instructions.

However, it is becoming evident that having “tasted” blood in the war field, the warriors can no longer be controlled by the society. Consequently, these warriors appear to be involved in the new forms of banditry and cattle rustling in north-western Kenya. Since the return of these warriors from the war fields, the two phenomena have become more widespread, even in areas which hitherto were safe from the Pokot and Turkana cattle rustlers. For example, in February 1998, bandits from Pokot launched one of the bloodiest raids in living memory against their neighbours, the Marakwet (Magut interview 1998; *Daily Nation* 13 Feb 1998). Thousands of people were killed or displaced; thousands of livestock stolen; houses, stores and farms burnt down; and women raped.

The Marakwet leaders reacted angrily to the mayhem caused by their kinsmen, putting the blame entirely on the government for complicity in the attack. Thousands of security force members were deployed in the area to quell the violence and to bring the situation under control – but without much success. Thus, in April 1998, the government sent a battalion of military men, heavily armed with sophisticated weapons including helicopter gunships to



try and flush out the bandits. However, the mission also ended in failure. The bandits appear to be masters of the rugged and harsh terrain of north-western Kenya, compared to the security forces. Moreover, the bandits seem to be well trained and co-ordinated in their operations. This clearly shows that “the chicken have come home to roost”. The government had allegedly trained these warriors for a specific objective – political violence against real and perceived political enemies. Yet now they are giving the government a run for its money. Thus, as Cornwell clearly points out, “however understandable the initial resort to violence may be, its long term consequences are appallingly counter-productive” (Cornwell 1997:18). The heavy involvement of the youth in such warfare is a clear indication that warlords have realised their effectiveness as ruthless and brutal killers (Hutchful 1997:4). It also shows that the “spirit of violence” has taken over the moral fabric of the African society.

The problem of insecurity and lawlessness has evolved over a long period of time. The government seems not to have realised early enough the need to normalise the security situation until now when the task is insurmountable. For instance, in December 1996, bandits who were from a cattle rustling mission shot down a police helicopter which was carrying the Samburu District Commissioner, Mr Henry Nyandoro, and ten other senior security personnel who were trying to monitor their movements, killing all of them on the spot. The cattle raiding expedition was led by one of the Pokot warlords, who allegedly shot down the helicopter using a bazooka (*Daily Nation* 28-31 Dec 1996; *The East African Standard* 28-31 Dec 1996). The bandits were said to have been heavily armed with sophisticated weapons such as rocket-propelled grenades and launchers, landmines, machine guns, and an assortment of other weapons. This therefore shows the daring nature and type of heavy weaponry used in the new forms of banditry and cattle rustling. Thus very often the security forces are hesitant in pursuing the bandits into their hideouts, since they have learnt through experience that it might be suicidal. The militarisation of the Pokot and Turkana bandits and cattle rustlers has therefore become more pronounced. Very often the Turkana and Pokot warlords organise joint cattle raiding operations, involving thousands of retainers, into Uganda, Sudan and Ethiopia.

Much of north-western Kenya therefore is now desolate, most families have fled their homes and are living in refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda, and in the small trading centres. The local people are suffering at the hands of both the bandits and the security forces. Whenever the security forces fail in their operations against bandits, they often vent their anger on the civilian

population whom they accuse of colluding with the bandits. As a punishment, the security forces often rape local women and confiscate livestock. On the other hand, the bandits may also punish heavily the local populace who may be suspected of working as government informers. The local people therefore find themselves in a “double jeopardy” – unsure of which option to take. Hence the tendency to run away and escape from the reach of both. The question that one may ask is, what went wrong?

Bad politics is a major contributory factor to the current sad state of affairs in north-western Kenya. The local political leaders have tended to encourage their people to continue with the age-old cultural practice of cattle rustling. These politicians fear that any attack on the practice of cattle rustling may be politically suicidal. The government also stands accused for having adopted inimical economic and political policies which tended to perpetuate the marginalisation of the pastoral communities. This is clearly evident in the distribution of economic and political resources. The government recognises the importance of these societies only when it requires their political support, such as during election time.

3. The socio-economic and political impact of banditry and cattle rustling

Most of these factors have already been mentioned and discussed in parts 1 and 2, so that they may be briefly summarised here.

Suffering, especially by women

Cattle rustling and banditry have led to the loss of many human lives and the displacement of various population groups.

Women and children seem to bear the brunt in these new forms of violence. Contrary to traditional norms, they are not spared. As the then UN Deputy Secretary-General, Layashi Yaker, stated in 1994:

Today women constitute 80% of the displaced and refugees in Africa. Violations of the fundamental rights of women and girls are widespread in times of war and civil strife, including atrocious crimes as well as rape, torture, murder, maltreatment and neglect.

(Ayot 1995:3)

Furthermore, Theodore Ayot notes that “wars” and conflict often leave women in situations whereby they can hardly make ends meet. They have little or no



resources at all against these acts of violence, whether they occur while they are trying to make it across the border or in a refugee camp (Ayot 1995:4).

Breakdown of the social order

The targeting of non-combatants, especially women and children, seems to be a symptom of the breakdown of the entire social order.

Another symptom is the way in which cattle are raided for selfish purposes. The pastoral communities have a lot of attachment to cattle due to their ritualistic and cultural importance. Thus, the loss of livestock is assumed to affect the entire social fabric.

Economic hardship

The 1980s happened to be a period characterised by droughts and famines. At the same time the cattle-rustling menace appeared on the scene, bringing about a massive looting of livestock and destruction of property. The Pokot and the Turkana lost more than 80% of their livestock during this period. By February 1982 about 50% of the Turkana population (180,000) were in refugee camps and depended on relief supplies (Markakis 1993:146). Consequently, most people were in a state of despair, hoping for a “messiah” to deliver them from their unending tribulations.

In most parts of north-western Kenya it is extremely difficult for the pastoralists to get started again after heavy stock losses. Thus social and economic differentiation is becoming more pronounced. As Doornboss asserts, “At present, class formation is incipient rather than existent and pastoralists by and large still make up a moral community of shared suffering rather than one divided by hereditary inequalities” (Markakis 1993:15).

Very often the displaced and impoverished pastoralists have been forced to resort to selling firewood and charcoal or offering farm labour, which are regarded as degrading to the pastoral groups. As Salih (1992) notes, “with no options of survival, they have little choice but to exploit key environmental resources to provide food and income for survival”.

An environment of insecurity

Violence and warfare in north-western Kenya have created an environment of insecurity. Cattle rustling has even created tension and conflict among the neighbouring societies. The twin phenomena of banditry and cattle rustling have become endemic in the region, affecting approximately two million people, ranging from the Turkana in the north, the Samburu and Pokot in the

centre, and the Keiyo, Marakwet and Tugen in the south of the study area. The intensity of cattle rustling centres around the Turkana, Pokot and Marakwet communities. Cattle warlords are having a field day in this environment of lawlessness. The idle and impoverished youths are easily manipulated by the warlords to join their private armies. The ability of the warlords to organise and arm their forces is a clear indication that the state no longer has the monopoly of the use of force. The Pokot youth seems to be happy in enlisting into these armies, which they feel is synonymous to defending societal interest against an enemy, the state.

The shelving of development projects

Because of the state of anarchy and lawlessness in the region it is very difficult to implement any development project. Government officers and the NGOs based in the area live in constant fear of the bandits. The often wanton destruction of life and property and the use of terror in all its manifestations tend to undermine the sense of value, dignity and harmony. It should be noted that a climate of peace is a prerequisite for the respect and enjoyment of human rights, and for sustainable socio-economic development. North-western Kenya is no exception to this rule.

Political manipulation

At present the warlords appear to be the wealthiest among the Turkana and the Pokot, hence they control all aspects of social and economic life, and even the political orientation of the people. As already said, they seem to have some hypnotising powers over the people. Thus poverty, hunger and destitution have been accompanied by aggressive and predatory pursuance of political goals. In such a scenario, as Salih (1992:30) correctly points out, "... the state is reduced to an arena of competing interests and political objectives inconsistent either with its role as the main monopoliser of the use of force or the sole arbiter of divergent ethnic and regional interests".

Currently the politics of the pastoral communities are dominated by warlordism. The warlords now control all aspects of social, economic and political life of the people. They seem to have some hypnotising powers over the people. Thus they are a law unto themselves. The state of insecurity and lawlessness in north-western Kenya and the collapse of social and economic structures have created a category of "lumpen-proletariats", who often resort to acts of banditry and cattle rustling.



Conclusion

The study has attempted to provide an analysis of the twin phenomena of banditry and cattle rustling in north-western Kenya. It is the contention of the study that the two phenomena have had adverse effects on the people of the region by creating an environment of violence and insecurity. It points out that cattle rustling has undergone fundamental transformation from a cultural practice to an international commercial venture organised and bankrolled by cattle warlords. The study also points out that the major losers in this environment of insecurity are the small and poor peasants who have been pauperised and turned into destitute, internally displaced persons and refugees in their own country.

Available evidence shows that there is a significant connection between environmental conflict and the insecurity created by cattle rustling and banditry in north-western Kenya. The study therefore suggests that this nexus needs to be clearly comprehended by the political leaders and the provincial administration in the area. Government policy makers must take cognisance of these facts and identify how the environmentally (ecologically) related threat to peace can be contained, lessened or eradicated.

Various attempts have been made by the government since the colonial era to exercise a strong level of control over the pastoralists. During the colonial period the aim was to pacify the pastoralists and to ensure peace and order. This tendency has had several implications. It has tended to present the pastoralists as unreliable people prone to violence, and hence to propagate depastoralisation. This intervention in the pastoral economy is spearheaded by urban-based elite whose interests and aspirations are at variance with those of the pastoralists. Such an elite views the practice as a primordial mode of production which should be discontinued. Doornboss points out that pastoralism has come to be considered “not as a mode of existence with its own needs and demands but either as a nuisance or even a threat or (at best) a resource to be exploited in the natural interest” (Markakis 1993:118). For a long time the official state policy therefore tends to view cattle rustling and banditry as a mere cultural problem of the pastoralists and not a serious issue of state security. In other words, the two phenomena were seen as a normal form of the nomadic lifestyle.

Thus the state's policy seems to correspond with the now discredited social anthropologists' interpretation based on the so-called “cattle complex”. As Rigby points out, “there seems to be general agreement among lay people

and social anthropologists that pastoralists are more conservative and resistant to change than are societies with mixed or truly developed agricultural economies” (Galaty et al 1980:184). Rigby’s thesis therefore posits that the causal link between pastoralism and conservatism is twofold. First, the adaptation to a harsh ecological environment, and secondly the intensity of values about livestock in their society, i.e. the cattle complex. According to this theory, which was interpreted in Freudian terms, the pastoralists have an insatiable desire for livestock, and this, coupled with the harsh environment, results in their propensity to acquire more and more livestock (Markakis 1993:205). The state’s opinion, therefore, is that the pastoral society is conservative, slow to adapt to change and in many respects actually against change. Raiding is therefore portrayed as a factor that is embedded in the pastoralists’ mentality and that can only be eradicated by the discontinuation of pastoralism and the adoption of agriculture, or by transforming it into ranching. Although several “good on paper” pastoral transformation programmes have been attempted in some parts of Kenya, such as Maasailand, the expected results have not been realised, especially due to unexpected conditions, such as the vagaries of the weather (Kituyi 1990:ch 8; Markakis 1993:152; Galaty et al 1980:102).

On the other hand, however, pastoralism cannot be simply dismissed. As Doornboss avers, the pastoralists “have demonstrated economic and social acumen in the exploitation of their arid homelands. Those lands are too arid for anything but nomadic, or at best, transhumant pastoralism. The only other option is to migrate and leave the bush to the game” (Markakis 1993:87). Pastoralists should therefore be given the opportunity of determining their future. Important decisions and policies affecting their mode of existence should not just be forced down their throats without their active involvement from the initial stages to the implementation process. As Nkonyangi clearly points out, “Most pastoral people are not looking for handouts, such an attitude is repulsive to them. What they want is something they can really participate in as their own right from the beginning” (Markakis 1993:195). Sustainable development requires grassroots support.

The problem of insecurity in north-western Kenya cannot be solved unless the pastoralists are assured of the continuation of their age old way of life. Indeed, it might be helpful if the neighbouring countries liaised to introduce some regional, integrated programmes which could facilitate pastoral movements across the border in response to ecological constraints and climatic variations.



The state has tended to ignore and neglect the welfare of the pastoralists in terms of development and the distribution of political and economic resources. The government's attitude towards the pastoral groups should change. To a large extent it has only been the NGOs and the missionaries who have attempted to alleviate the plight of the pastoral communities through the provision of schools, boreholes, health centres and other facilities. However, most of these are located in the trading centres and are thereby not easily accessible to the rural majority.

Moreover, there is evidence of state appropriation of pastoral land and its allocation to the wealthy and powerful as well as politically well-connected individuals in Marsabit district. Parts of the pastoral lands have been turned into game reserves. All these moves have denied the pastoralists expansive areas which have been used as grazing ground for a long time. Such state actions are aimed at satisfying the various demands created in one way or another by the international market economy. The incorporation of the pastoral communities into the market economy in the form of sale of livestock and livestock products has had adverse effects. It has contributed to the emergence of cattle warlords, who are exacerbating a state of insecurity as they compete to acquire livestock for personal profit.

The institutionalisation of violence and the resultant insecurity have contributed to widespread poverty, hunger and destitution, which is unprecedented in the region's history. For most of the people the material base of their existence has been eroded. They are now an uprooted lot who find it extremely difficult to accept the reality of their situation, and cling to an undying hope of resuming pastoral activities in "the near future".

The criminalisation by the government of cattle raids among the pastoral communities is based largely on the false assumption that such raids are a primitive factor relating to nomadic life. Thus the raids are not seen as partly an outcome of modern economic intrusion impinging on the socio-cultural setting of the pastoralists (Ocan n.d.). To a large extent the primordial causes of raids have been compounded and exacerbated by the effects of the "modern" economy in tandem with the unfolding and changing nature of social relations. The commercialisation and internalisation of cattle rustling are largely attributed to the expanding global market for livestock and livestock products, and the proliferation of weapons, all in the name of economic liberalisation and democracy!

The paper therefore argues that the apparent militarisation of the pastoral culture and the apparent collapse of the traditional mechanisms of socio-

economic reproduction have caused the gun to become the tool of opportunity for both the warlords and the youth. Thus the bandits and the cattle rustlers cannot be militarily contained through the use of conventional war tactics, since they adopt a form of guerrilla tactics against the security forces. The government's reaction to its frustration and inability to control acts of lawlessness has mainly been sending in the security forces – who mostly unleash terror on the civilian population through the use of extra-judicial methods of torture and rape, instead of facing the enemy. Such inhuman acts tend to make the state unpopular and the people unwilling to assist the security forces in their operations. The state therefore must adopt a new and different strategy in order to obtain the support of the population. Thus there is need to inculcate good working relations between the security forces and the local people for the mutual benefit of the state and the local inhabitants, both of whom are suffering at the hands of the bandits and cattle rustlers. The study concluded that there is an urgent need for a concerted effort by both the government and the people as well as the NGOs to sit down together and find an amicable solution acceptable to all so that some semblance of normalcy can be restored in north-western Kenya.

Endnote

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