

European Journal of Conflict Management (EJCM)



Managing the Menace of Cattle Rustling and Banditry in North Rift Kenya: The Role of Pokot Women

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to create a discourse surrounding women role in combating cattle rustling and banditry in north rift, Kenya. The article underscores that Pokot women play key roles in instigating cattle rustling and banditry in the north rift region. While media generally perceive women as passive bystanders, it projects men as the protagonists and antagonists during conflict. The thinking that women are only victims of conflicts, just because of the biases in reporting by the media, needs to be critically looked into.

Methodology: The study relied on secondary sources where information from books, journals, periodicals and online opens sources was acquired before deep content analysis was carried and presented in prose.

Findings: The study found that although women bear the brunt of conflicts as the post-Cold War examples clearly show, they are not always on the receiving end. Thus, the suffering that women go through because of conflicts has made them become active participants in such fights. While the article conceded that there are several other causal factors accounting for cattle rustling in the north rift, it finds that the role of Pokot women in fuelling livestock theft is a crucial one.

Recommendation: The article recommended to policy makers that, if meaningful and sustainable peace is to be made in the north rift, they should consider engaging Pokot women in the peacemaking processes.

Keywords: *Cattle rustling, Pokot women, North Rift region.*

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Conceptualization of Cattle Rustling

Cattle rustling is the act of stealing livestock by one group from the others. Cattle rustling in the North Rift region involves the invasion by tens of armed youth from one community into the other with the intention of driving away cows, sheep, goats, donkeys and camels from them (Huho, 2012). In most cases, stealing of cattle results in fierce clashes between communities leading to the destruction of property and loss of life. Cattle rustling in the North Rift region is not a new phenomenon. However, over the time it has mutated in terms of mode of operation (Gumba, 2020). Initially, raids were organized, guided, blessed and supervised by the elders so as to minimize fatalities (Huho, 2012). The diminished role of the elders has led to the increase in the frequency of uncoordinated raids and resulted in heavy fatalities. Cattle rustling is becoming more sophisticated as there is a change from the use of locally made weapons to modern automatic machine guns (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014).

Cattle rustling has metamorphosed from a cultural game to a serious commercial and political venture and now to an organized crime involving use of sophisticated weapons (Okoli et al., 2014). As noted by Greimer (2013), due to the use of sophisticated weapons, raids have become severely violent and often lead to politicized claims of administrative boundaries. Such claims are geared towards expansion and exclusive use of land and by extension the involvement of politicians attempt to safeguard homogenous election bases. Cattle rustling in the North Rift met many tenets of violent conflicts. It involved clashing between different factions; use of force; killing and destruction of property among other things. It is therefore, important to note that this article viewed cattle rustling as any form of conflict and the two concepts have been recognized to be closely intertwined.

Media often present women as victims of violence because they invariably bear the brunt of conflicts. While violent conflict also affects men, women are more vulnerable to sexual assaults and are often used as tools of war. The effects of conflicts on women compared to men are devastatingly negative. Apart from wars directly and physically affecting women, they also experience other indirect impacts. For example, they become breadwinners and heads of families after they lose their husbands and sons during conflicts and cattle rustling activities (Siebert, 2009). Most accounts of conflicts through news, government reports, novels and cinemas cast men as the only actors in battle situations (Copson, 1994), a narrative that this paper is challenging. For instance, media reports of the 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya paid little attention to the roles played by women in the conflict (Oluwafemi, 2008). On the other hand, an article by Rutto (2017) in the Kenyan standard digital newspaper portrayed the cattle rustling that led to several deaths in Baringo County was conducted by only men. Such imbalances in the media reportage rendered the role played by Kenyan women in managing and resolving the conflict almost invisible.

This article focused on the role of Pokot women in conflict and particularly cattle rustling in the North Rift region of Kenya. Pokot is a community constituted by a Kalenjin ethnic group occupying the entire West Pokot County and Tiaty Sub-County of Baringo County in the Northern Rift region of Kenya. The Pokot are mainly pastoralists who occupy arid and semi-arid lands (ASAL) and keep on migrating from one place to another in search of pasture and water

for their animals. The nomadic nature of the community most of the times result in conflict with their neighbours mostly the Marakwet, the Tugen, the Turkana, the Ilchamus and the Samburu.

1.2 Kenyan Government Interventions in the North Rift Region

Cattle rustling menace in North Rift Kenya have defied interventions by the community, civil society and the government (Murkomen, 2015). Sustained government inaction towards cattle rustling nonetheless changed in 1992 when over 600 households were torched, families displaced, approximately 700 people were killed including security personnel, and thousands of livestock stolen in the Kerio Valley. As a result of the incident, the government set up a police post in the area (Kenya Human Right Commission (KHCR), 2001).

Security responses, which do not put into consideration the role of women, are always employed to curb the raids whenever they occur. But this has not brought forth any lasting relief to the residents in the region. While several illegal arms were in the hands of pastoralists, the disarmament process had not been fruitful (Kenya Police, 2015). Thus, the livestock keepers in the region gave up on waiting for the government to help whenever they are raided. According to the Kenya Police reports, most of the herders purchase AK-47 rifles and other more sophisticated arms in order to protect their lives, animals and property from the bandits.

The inefficiency of security operations is not a new phenomenon. Murkomen, (2015) avers that the deployment of security officers to quell cattle rustling between the Pokot and Marakwet communities in Kerio Valley failed to effectively curb livestock theft. Paradoxically, the security agencies are accused of meting violence on civilians through torture and rape (Osamba, 2000). Even with the high police to citizen ratio of 1:62, cattle rustling continues to persist. This calls for the re-evaluation of the response strategies that the government is putting in place (Kamenju, 2003). Statistics from the Kenya Police (2005) also revealed a mismatch between security responses and cattle rustling. For example, after a serious raid on Marakwet by the Pokot in 1976, the government established a General Service Unit (GSU) camp and opened a police post and later deployed Ant Stock Theft Unit (ASTU) in the area. The security responses could not still end cattle rustling in the area following other deadly attacks in 1992 and 2001.

The government's heavy presence in the North Rift region has thus yielded very little results in terms of combating cattle rustling. Citing two main weaknesses that constrained the security responses, Cheserek et al., (2012) demonstrated that the deployment of GSU, ASTU, regular police, Administration Police (AP) and the Kenya Police Reservist (KPR) could not eradicate cattle rustling and its ripple effects in the communities. The first weakness that made the security response inefficient was the lack of coordination. The joint security team faced challenges of who is to command them and differed in other operational functions. Secondly, the cattle rustlers had more powerful and sophisticated weapons than the joint security team: this made it difficult for the response team to pursue the bandits.

It is the above government responses that the problem of this article lies. The article questions the current and traditional interventions that have demonstrated inadequacy in combating cattle rustling for a long time. From early 1990s, the government has responded to the cattle rustling menace the same way. This article intended to venture into this literature gap and sought to provide some explanation as to why the traditional interventions have failed to adequately

address cattle rustling in the North Rift region. The article also, investigates the role of Pokot women.

1.3 Reasons for Interrogating the Role of Pokot Women

The Pokot community plays a central role in perpetration of cattle rustling in the North Rift and therefore any intervention that targets them could have a direct impact on the prevalence of cattle theft and banditry in the region. The Pokot community is important in reducing cattle rustling because they are centrally located and bordered, in all directions, by other communities: to the North is the Turkana; to the East is the Samburu; to the South is the Tugen and Ilchamus, to the South West is the Marakwet and to the West is the Karamojong of Uganda. Secondly, the Pokot community has been fighting and stealing livestock from all its neighbours, an accusation that Nganga (2012) advances, describing them as hostile and aggressive to their neighbours.

The above explanation clearly indicated that the Pokot community is important in combating and reducing cattle rustling and banditry in the North Rift. The article believed that attending to the role of Pokot women is likely, in the long run, to significantly resolve the menace cattle rustling and banditry in the North Rift region.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Other Causal Factors of Cattle Rustling in the North Rift region

This article contended that apart from Pokot women scuttling the war against cattle rustling in the North Rift region, there are other causal factors that may require attention if the war against banditry was to be won. These drivers include, but not limited to, the retrogressive culture, climate change, proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and politicization and commercialization of cattle theft.

2.1.1 Retrogressive Culture

Retrogressive culture is defined as ways of life which are held by communities that are backward and detrimental to their development, prosperity and coexistence with others. Likaka and Muia (2015) projected four main cultural components that fuel cattle rustling. These are; generational lines and age-set organizations, marriage, *moranism* and rites of passage, such as circumcision. However, Nganga (2012) singles out the payment of bridewealth, fines and gifts to friends among the pastoral community as a more serious cultural driver of cattle rustling.

The prominence of cattle among the pastoral communities' socio-cultural organization was cited as a key driver of cattle rustling. The Pokot, Maasai, Turkana and the Samburu believed that god gave them cows (Chebunet et al., 2013). Whenever they see cows in the possession of other communities, they feel the urge to 'return them home,' to the people with the right of ownership. Mutsotso et al., (2014) augment this fact by arguing that the Pokot community believed that god created Pokot man at mount *Mtelo* and gave him cattle and not any other community. Therefore, the Pokot community's presumption that all cattle in the world belong to them.

Among the Maasai community, young warriors proved their manhood after initiation. In the process, they engaged in cattle rustling so that they could show they are responsible and grown-up men capable of taking care of the community. In Maasai, cultural requirements preceding marriage also fueled livestock theft and banditry (Muchai & Jefferson, 2001). When the young

men demonstrated some sense of maturity and responsibility it meant they were ripe for marriage.

Chebunet et al., (2013) explained how special attachment to land by a pastoral community caused conflict with neighbouring communities. The Turkana community believed that their present-day land was given to them by their ancestors and god as inheritance. The Pokot community claim that their ancestral land stretches from the mountains to the plains of Lotong'ot near Lobokat game reserve. This explained why there were frequent conflicts around Kainuk area, largely because the Pokot felt that Kainuk provided the Turkana with a strategic point to attack them during dry seasons. During dry seasons, the Pokot grazed their livestock in Lotong'ot plain which is a disputed land between the Turkana and themselves.

2.1.2 Climate Change

Climate change is associated with conflicts and cattle rustling in the ASAL areas. Using the Karamoja community as an example, Lanyero (2011) demonstrated that climate change directly led to increased cases of cattle theft and banditry in northern Uganda. Lanyero gave evidence on how the pastoralists in the north of Uganda found difficulties in turning into crop farming as a way of curbing cattle rustling because the rising temperatures in the region destroyed their crops. Pastoral communities in the ASAL areas respond to temporal climatic variations through migration in search for pasture and water for their livestock. While communities are migrating in search for pasture and water, they often compete for the same resources, clash and steal livestock from one another (Kiamba et al., 2011). Thus, when two communities meet in a grazing area, they clash and engage in supremacy battles that spiral into raids and counter-raids.

Climate change and unpredictability of climatic conditions leave the pastoral communities vulnerable. The changes in rainfall pattern coupled with prolonged droughts make the adaptability and resilience of the pastoral communities a difficult experience. Unpredictability in climate patterns also leads to huge loses of livestock by the pastoralists; an experience that they have responded to by restocking their herds through raids (Adano & Witsenburg, 2004). Juma (2000) concurred with Adano et al., (2004) by giving an excellent example of the Turkana community who experienced a fourteen years' drought between 1972 and 1999. The drought created immense pressure on them to raid their neighbours in order to restock their cattle.

2.1.3 Politicization and Commercialization of Cattle Rustling

Watson (2003) defined commercialization of cattle rustling as the integration of pastoralist into the market economy by placing cattle and cattle products within the easy reach of the market. On the other hand, politicization of cattle rustling refers to the conduct of cattle raids for political reasons or at the interest of politicians. In most cases, the proceeds of politically motivated cattle theft are used to fund political activities such as elections (Ibid). Politicians' role in cattle rustling cannot be overstated. Cheserek (2007) averred that, politicians assist their communities to acquire arms and ammunitions from different sources; provide facilitation, in terms of food and transport during spying and during the actual raids, to the raiders; and also provide a ready market for the stolen livestock and livestock products. All these support from the political class provide fertile grounds for cattle rustling to flourish.

In Kenya for instance, politicians facilitate the transportation of stolen cattle from the rural North Rift region to the cities where they are slaughtered and consumed locally in the urban areas or

exported to international markets. The politicians and connected businessmen together with senior security officers, assist in clearing of roadblock to ease transportation of the stolen cattle. When the animals reach the various slaughter houses in the cities, they are cleared quickly and slaughtered without queueing. The market for meat in Kenyan urban area alone is worth about USD 500 million (Gumba, 2020). Apart from the political class providing the raiders with the necessary support for raiding, the role of the unscrupulous businessmen also plays a key role. The rogue business people purchase livestock from the raiders at a relatively lower cost and take them to the market for sale at competitive prices making huge profits (Cheserek et al., 2012).

2.1.4 Proliferation of Weapons

The availability of sophisticated weapons in the North Rift region of Kenya increases the severity of cattle rustling. Watson (2003) asserted that the presence of automatic arms has eased the stealing of livestock and therefore increased the number of raids that are being conducted. The use of sophisticated weapons, such as AK 47 and G3 rifles remains a stark contrast to traditional weapons previously used by the Pokot and Marakwet communities (Kipkorir & Welbourn, 1973). The communities of the North Rift region initially used traditional crude weapons such as clubs, spears, bows and arrows, while raiding each other

Since the introduction of the gun culture, the bandits' mode of operation significantly changed. Apart from the increased frequencies and fatalities, as pointed out earlier, other aspects of cattle rustling have also changed (Cheserek et Al., 2012). During the traditional raids, there was strict adherence of raiding culture: there was no killing; the captured women and children were integrated into the raiding community. This is completely contrary to what is currently happening: there is no adherence to traditional modes of operation because of the “trigger happy” bandits who use their weapons to kill everybody they come across, including women and children. (Cheserek et al., 2012).

2.2 The Role of Women in the Perpetration of Conflict and Cattle Rustling

The media has, to a great extent portrayed women as victims of conflict (Siebert, 2009). On the contrary, such assertions are challengeable in the case of Pokot women because they take part in perpetration of conflict by participating behind the scene. This section thus assesses the role of women as direct, indirect, active and passive in so far as conflict is concerned.

In Sri Lanka during their intrastate conflict, it was recorded that thirty percent of the combatants were women; in Bosnia – Herzegovina and Rwanda genocide, women were actively and directly involved in ethnic cleansing (Bouta & Frerks, 2002). Also, some women in Nigeria supported Boko Haram to the extent of sacrificing their lives by carrying the roles of suicide bombers (Matfess, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2016). The role of women in actively and directly fuelling conflicts continue to manifest as Stewart (2010) demonstrated with several examples from Nigeria where some women joined their men in the fight. Similarly, women in Liberia were involved in the conflict as combatants (McCarthy, 2011)

Women's role in aggravating conflict among the pastoral communities in the North Rift region in many occasions happens unconsciously. Watson (2003) revealed that women who are victims of cattle theft do not wish other families to go through the trauma they have experienced. Yet, the same women subconsciously cause their men to steal cattle because they pester them about the shortage of milk in the house. Such complaints pressurize men to go and get more cattle for their

families to have enough milk. In Nigeria, the Boko Haram also used women as spies, recruiters, messengers and smugglers of arms and human. This saw the insurgence use of the unsuspected groups to penetrate the society (International Crisis Group, 2016). In addition, women from Aguleri and Umeleri women's development association provided support to combatants in terms of money and food.

In Kashmir along the Indian-Pakistani borders, women played a crucial role of acting as couriers during war. They carried messages from spies and smuggled arms and ammunitions by hiding them inside their veils. The Kashmir case of women involvement in conflict reached a higher level when they were used to plant bombs (Stewart, 2010). McCarthy (2011) averred while giving Liberian examples that the Women Associated with Fighting Force (WAFF) provided a lot of support to the combatants by providing food, cleaning their fighting camps in the forests and by fetching them water for domestic use.

There is a fascinating debate on whether women are willing to participate, either actively or passively; and directly or indirectly in conflicts. While there is a notion that pastoral women are always disadvantaged during cattle rustling and banditry, the contrary narrative needs to be considered. Women actually gain in two main ways: one is the gain of livestock. Women in pastoral communities are happier to have a bigger herd of cattle because they will have more milk as well as long term assets. Consequently, a mother would gain prestige for having sired a brave son (Watson, 2003). These two benefits that women enjoy after a successful raid motivate them to be more involved in instigating conflicts and to push their men to cattle rustling.

Conversely, women have also fought in unwilling circumstances. For example, the International Crisis Group, (2016) observed that some women join insurgencies to escape their social conditions while other women are abducted and made to fight. However, other women join insurgencies voluntarily. Those who are kidnapped by the Boko Haram had a lot of problems re-integrating into the society; they therefore, have no option but to go back and continue fighting (International Crisis Group, 2016). This is out of their free will.

2.3 The Role of Women in Peace making

Watson, (2003) considered the responsibility of women in peacemaking among the pastoral communities in the Karamoja cluster¹ as a noble idea. He presents that while holding meetings with Turkana elders, it was proposed that women be included because of their role in abusing and ridiculing men whenever they fail to carry out raids. Watson further opined that during the women peace crusade,² the speeches of women while narrating the traumas they go through during the conflict and cattle rustling, sent strong emotional messages that made warriors to cry. Women also play a critical role in conflict management and peacemaking through proper and

¹ Karamoja cluster is a region that encompass the Northern Kenya, Eastern Uganda, Southern parts of South Sudan as well Southern Ethiopia. The region is mainly occupied by pastoral communities who from time to time cross the international boundaries to raid one another to steal livestock

² Crusade is an occasion where the women of all the pastoral communities within the Karamoja cluster were moving from one community to the other to advocate for peace

positive upbringing of children. Good morals amongst them, respecting human dignity, is implanted into a child's mind as he gradually grows (Ogoloma & Ukpere, 2011). In the African pastoralist society, especially in the North Rift of Kenya, women spend more time with their children and therefore, mothers do more of upbringings of the kids compared to their husbands. If pastoral women decide to give wrong teachings to their kids at that tender age, then a violent society is being prepared.

Women are also able to bridge war and bring peace in the African societies through intermarriages. For instance, Mutunga (2005) postulates that when two warring communities have had raids on each other and fatalities have been reported, a cleansing ceremony is done where women are exchanged in terms of marriage so as to bring peace and prevent future incidence. In many communities in the North Rift of Kenya, women are known to make peace in two ways. When there is war and an enemy has been captured and is about to be killed, a woman can step in front of him and request for a pardon, and his life would be saved. Secondly, when an elderly woman asks the warriors to stop violence, they shun immediately in her respect. If the warriors do not cease the conflict, the elderly woman may expose her nakedness; a gesture that no man would ever want to experience because it is associated with serious curses (Ogoloma & Ukpere, 2011).

Another instance that reflects the position of women as peacemakers was witnessed during the Kenyan Post Election Violence (PEV) of 2007-2008. At the height of ongoing attacks, approximately two hundred women in the Nairobi slum of Kibera joined together, disregarding their political and ethnic affiliations, and marched through the streets of Nairobi calling for peace and reconciliation (Karambu, 2008). The Liberian case also offer a good example: religious women formed a movement that inspired all the citizens, regardless of religion and ethnic affiliation, and helped in ending the second civil war of 1999-2013 (Kieh, 2013).

3.0 The Role of Pokot Women in Cattle Rustling and banditry

According to Cheserek et al., (2012), Pokot women compose and sing praise songs for their successful raiders. After successful cattle rustling expedition, the Pokot women compose songs and sing for their heroes – who have brought home stolen cattle with them. When Pokot men are praised, they feel honored and would want to go steal more cattle within the most opportune time. The singing of praise songs and the dancing that is dedicated to the successful rustlers challenges the other young men to partake the vice to earn themselves the envious heroic status. On the other hand, the men who failed to bring any stolen cattle to the village, either because they were overwhelmed by the 'enemy' or did not go for any raid at all, are not treated with any kindness by the Pokot women. Instead, Pokot women compose songs of mockery and use them to ridicule and castigate young men who are also branded as cowards (Okumu, 2013). The young men who are labelled as cowards for being afraid to face the enemy and take cattle from them, by force, feel intimidated and alienated and find difficult times in getting brides to marry. The efforts by the 'cowards' to redeem themselves would lead to an increase in the quest to steal livestock from their neighbours, leading to a protracted raids and counter-raids between pastoral communities (Watson, 2003)

Traditionally, among the Pokot nation, division of duties is clear between men and women. Men go out to look after livestock and ensure that they get pasture and water while the women are left at home to take care of children among other household chores. During upbringing of children,

most of the training about community norms is passed to the children in form of riddles and stories by their mothers. It is during such interaction that women find the opportunity to “poison” their children’s minds by teaching them about violence. Such observations were postulated by Nganga (2012) who observed that when Pokot children are taught about the cultural values of cattle, they are also informed that all the non-Pokot are enemies who should be destroyed.

Pokot women are the greatest beneficiaries in terms of gaining from the proceeds of stolen livestock. Because women are charged with the responsibility of supplying food in their households and coupled with the fact that the Pokot community depends on livestock for their foods, any increase in livestock in the family make women’s work easier (Watson, 2003). Mothers of the raiders also take the responsibility of distributing the stolen cattle within the family. She decides what number of cows goes to who and why without being questioned. Such motivations are the reasons why women continue to pressurize their men to go and steal livestock from their neighbouring communities.

The culture of payment of huge bridewealth exacerbates cattle rustling and banditry problem in the Pokot community. Pokot men are required to pay a huge herd of cattle to acquire a wife. The bride groom is required to pay a bridewealth of about 30 to 60 cows on average. For educated women, the bridewealth is even higher. This situation is compounded by the fact that Pokot mothers are the ones who decide the bridewealth for their daughters. As Nganga (2012) explains, the bridewealth has increased pressure on young men to acquire cows, even if they have to steal, so as to afford to marry and start families. Watson, (2003) also demonstrates the extent women can go in fostering cattle theft. For example, Pokot women look down upon poor suitors who do not have huge herds of livestock. When a Pokot man, with no cows, approaches a young woman to ask for her hand in marriage, he is mocked and abused in return. This scenario makes men bitter, and pushes them to steal cattle from the neighbouring communities in an effort to defend his manhood.

4.0 Conclusion

The role of Pokot women in cattle rustling and banditry in the north rift, Kenya is prominent. The Pokot women pressurizing of their men has resulted in raids and counter-raids among the pastoral communities in the north rift. Notable, the government has not engaged the women in the combat against cattle rustling and banditry. This study concludes that if the government of Kenya had earlier involved the Pokot women in the management of cattle rustling and banditry, the menace could have been reduced significantly. This is because apart from Pokot women pressurizing their men, most of the things that a Pokot man does revolves around making their women comfortable. A Pokot man will raid to make his mother proud, he will steal livestock to prove his manhood in a bid to get a spouse, he will invade a neighboring community to bring livestock to avoid mockery from women, he will rob so as to raise a huge number of cattle to pay bridewealth for his wife, he will foray and get livestock from other ethnic communities to avoid complaints of lack of milk or other livestock products from his wife.

5.0 Recommendation

This article therefore recommended that Kenyan policymakers should engage Pokot women in the combat against cattle rustling. The government should review its traditional approaches of only deploying security operations, which have proved ineffective, and replace them with

projects that engage Pokot women in revenue generating activities, among other alternative sources of livelihood. This move will reduce Pokot women dependency on livestock and livestock products and indirectly reduce the pressure on their men to steal livestock from their neighbours.

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