From Protectors to Predators: The Transformation of a Turkana Age-set

By Ian Skoggard and Teferi Abate Adem (Human Relations Area Files)

ABSTRACT

Previous analyses of cattle raiding in east African nomadic herding societies tend to portray its significance in redistributing wealth and reproducing distinct cultural ethos. In this paper, we piece together the story of the Ngoroko, a group of Turkana men initiated into an age set, who became not just a marauding band of raiders, but also a formidable resistance force against state powers. We examine the environmental, social, economic, and political forces on the local, regional, and international levels that precipitated this change and the factors that continued to sustain it. We also use this story to engage with long held anthropological arguments which consider the age-set system as becoming less important both as a factor of social integration and source of social status. We believe that if we can get the story right, we will have a better understanding of the escalating violence in East African pastoral societies.

This paper comes out of a collaborative study of violence in East Africa by the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) and the Center for Social Complexity at George Mason University (GMU).[1] The Center for Social Complexity has been using agent-based computer modeling to simulate social, political and ecological behavior. HRAF has been asked to identify and help operationalize cultural components that would affect and mediate such behavior. The joint GMU and HRAF project now has taken on a more ambitious project of modeling a 1600 square kilometer region in East Africa that includes 134 ethnic groups in eight countries[2]

According to *The Ploughshares Monitor*, Africa has the largest concentration of contemporary violent conflict in the world (Pike et al. 2010, 47).[3] A majority of this conflict is in the pastoral zones of the Sahel, Horn, and East Africa, involving such groups as the Nuer, Dinka, Somalians and Karimojong cluster (ibid.). Living in the Turkana District in northwestern Kenya, the Turkana are part of the Karimojong cluster.[4] Most sources report an increase in violence in the region over the last thirty years (Goldsmith 1997, 2; Krätli and Swift 1999, iii; Buchannan-Smith and Lind 2005, 2; Witsenburg and Adano 2009, 521). Researchers identify two major types of conflict. One type is large inter-tribal raids across boundaries resulting in many casualties and the other

[2] The eight countries are Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanzania. In this model HRAF has helped to identify the settlement and subsistence patterns and socio-political organization of the cultural clusters.

[3] 41 percent in 2006 (Pike et al. 2010, 47)

[4] Other groups in the Karimojong cluster discussed in this paper are the Nyangatom, Karimojong and Jie.

type is small-scale theft of animals by bandits (Buchanan-Smith and Lind 2005, 8).

Although the small-scale animal thefts are less severe they are more frequent and overall

have as detrimental an impact on Turkana society as the less frequent large-scale raids

(Eriksen and Lind 2005, 17).[5]

The historian Donald Crummey argues that, "We must reject the contention that

Africa is a continent intrinsically more violent than others….The real challenge is to see

violence within its social setting, to appreciate its roots in social conflict, and to

understand why the people turn to it (Crummey 1986, 3)." In this paper we focus on one

agent of violence, cattle rustlers, or the *Ngoroko*. We argue that the Ngoroko are a rogue

age-set that evolved with the collapse of a generational system which in the past

underwrote the authority of elders and with it their ability to manage conflict.[6] The

anthropologist Jon Abbink makes the same argument writing about a pastoral group in

Ethiopia, the Suri. He attributes internal disarray among the Suri to a crisis in the

generational system and the loss of authority of elders over youngsters (Abbink 2007,

63). In his conclusion, he writes:

> One might almost speak of a traditional society passing through the 'postmodern'
> phase: Suri no longer have an overarching cultural narrative giving meaning to
> society as a cohesive whole, and they evince a loss of ideological elements
> founding the social order. In the absence of *komorus* [ritual leaders] and the elders
> of the 'reigning' *rórà* [junior elders] generation being able to exercise restraint and
> leadership, it is only the peer group, kinship bonds and the inescapable duties
> resulting from lineage or clan membership that bind Suri. (Abbink 2007, 67)

---

[5] Buchanan-Smith and Lind report that "in southern Turkana most households have lost animals to bandits
at least once in the year (Buchanan-Smith and Lind 2005, 3)."

[6] We have chosen the term "generational system" used by Tornay. Other authors in writing about similar
systems among related pastoral groups have used "generation set system," "age organization," "age-set
system," and "age-grade system."

We argue that the Turkana have also lost their overarching cultural narrative of one generation begetting another, conferring the gifts of adulthood and elderhood, two major socio-political statuses in Turkana society. Elders were regarded as closer to divinity and thereby had the power to bless and curse young adult men. The generational system structured the fraternal and filial sentiments of age- and generation-sets, respectively, which bound society together. However, the system became weakened as a consequence of Turkana expansion into the Rift Valley and their encounter with colonial powers. The situation today is such that there is no culturally sanctioned transfer of power between generations, which along with competing models of authority and access to firearms by all age groups has undermined the authority of elders and reduced generational succession to a violent struggle for power and status among coevals.

Ethnography and history of the Ngoroko

Unfortunately there is little ethnography on the Ngoroko. The anthropologist Terrence McCabe reports on Ngoroko in the locale he studied:

> During the 1980s it was not unusual for a small group of Ngoroko to show up at water holes and demand a steer or a few goats from herd boys. However, by the mid-1980s Ngoroko began to take animals from homesteads and demanded to have sex with the teenage girls. Relationships deteriorated further after a group of Ngoroko stole some milking camels from an *awi*; on another occasion Ngoroko attacked a series of homesteads, breaking one man's arm and throwing a baby into a fire (luckily the baby survived). (McCabe 102)

The history on the Ngoroko is also scant. Existing studies provide a rather broad explanation that attributes the emergence of this group to the combined effects of two

major historical processes on traditional Turkana political system. One was the emergence of famous ritual leaders or "great diviners" who, beginning in the 1870s, wield supernatural powers to usurp the leadership role of senior elders in commanding warfare. The other was the availability of modern firearms in the region which enabled ambitious warriors to wage resistance to British colonial occupation.

Prior to 1870s, the Turkana lived in greatly decentralized territorial communities commonly called sections. Residents of each section were organized along generation-sets in which elders wielded more influence as parents, cattle owners and herding unit heads. Juniors related to the elders as sons and grandsons and served as warriors and herders. With the arrival of colonial powers and modern firearms into the region towards the turn of the 19th century, the power of elders was challenged by ambitious individuals. The first to do this was one "great diviner" named Lokerio who, in 1870s, made himself "the hub of military activity" by commanding a large army of warriors recruited from several sections of Turkana society (Lamphear 1992, 30-32). By the turn of the twentieth century, another Turkana man named Ebei used the supernatural powers of trusted diviners to rise as "the fighting chief of all Turkana" (ibid.).[7]

In 1924, Ebei and several of his warriors were killed by the Dassenetch of Ethiopia. Surviving members once again re-established themselves as lawless bands in

---

[7] It is widely believed that Ebei started his career as leader of a small band of warrior with core members drawn from an age-set called *Ngiruru*. Members of this age set were from families who lost their livestock to adverse events including disease, confiscation by colonial forces, droughts and raids by rival ethnic groups (R. Dyson-Hudson 1999, 34). In 1917, this group sought to recover some livestock by raiding the Pokot. Instead of disbanding after the raid, the group became a permanent or semi-permanent force equipped with firearms. Part of the justification for this was probably the group's ambition to wage armed resistance to the British occupation. But it is also widely reported that members of this age set used their new status as armed bands to serve their own goals including "taking livestock, raping women, and disobeying elders" (ibid.).

the mountains of northern Turkana where the British forces could not reach (R. Dyson-Hudson 1999, 34). Elements of this group carried the tradition through to the 1950s when they re-emerged as well-armed bandits now called *Ngoroko*s. As in the past, the *Ngoroko* attacked neighboring groups (probably in the name of defending Turkana), but also raped and pillaged their own people and became cursed by the elders.[8]

History suggests that an escalation of fighting in the region in response to incursions of colonial powers forced unusual power into the hands of warrior heads who were backed by prophets, or diviners, and able to usurp the authority of the elders. [9] Although the prophets and warrior chiefs have passed, it appears that this generational rift has had a lasting impact as evidenced by the continued existence of the Ngoroko.

Collapse of the generational system

However, there is evidence that the generational system itself was compromised, which would also account for the persistence of the Ngoroko over time or at least their ability of to regenerate themselves under the appropriate conditions. In Gulliver's 1950s study of Turkana age organization, he does not mention generation sets. Instead he notes what he calls "alternations" within the age-set system. Turkana alternations are one of two groups one joins at initiation into an age-set. Gulliver makes clear, "the two groupings do not refer to tribal generations, for they are coexistent among a crowd of males of the same age such that about half will belong to each (Gulliver 1958, 902)."

---

[8] They also became known as *Ngiakitiba*, or "Those of the Elders' Curse" (McCabe 2004, 102).

[9] A classic account of the rise of local prophets in reaction to colonial incursion is Douglas Johnson's *Nuer Prophets* (1994, Oxford).

Gulliver treats the alternations as a moiety that divides each age-group and all of Turkana society into two parts.[10] "Turkana see the existence of these alternations as a fundamental dichotomy throughout the tribes….for all men of whatever age of a single alternation think of themselves as associated together as against men of other alternations (Gulliver 1958, 903)." On all public occasions men separate into alternations for the purpose of feasting, dancing, war-making and ritual (ibid.). The alternations also affect the pattern of authority within the tribe, such that, **"**Young men tend to seek the advice and help and to accept the orders and restraints of the senior men of their own alternation, but they can ignore both counsel and control coming from the other group (ibid.)." [11]

Gulliver is puzzled by the Turkana alternations. "Analytically," he writes, "there appears to be little or no significance in the contemporary system, for the division of initiated males into two groupings provides no additional principle of organizational values (Gulliver 1958, 919)." He suggests that the alternations may possibly "have lost their former function through a process of social change (ibid.)." He compares Turkana age organization to the neighboring Jie who do have a formal generational system in which "all males must be initiated into the generation immediately following that of their fathers" and "a new generation may not begin initiation until all members of the previous generation have been initiated (ibid.)." The Jie maintain a clear separation and sense of

---

[10] The two alternations are called "Stones" and "Leopards". Gulliver writes that "There is a fairly general notion that Stones are in some vague way senior as an alternation to the Leopards," although "no one could explain the reason for it (Gulliver 1958, 903)." However, he did not see any "significant difference in behavior, status, or privilege" between the two alternations, although during a rain ritual, "elderly Stones claimed to be more important than elderly Leopards (Gulliver 1958, 903-904)."

[11] Gulliver continues, "An elderly Stone at a ceremony or dance would not give orders to a young Leopard, but he would expect and would normally obtain compliance and respect from a young Stone (ibid.)."

continuity between generations.[12] Gulliver asks, "Why did the Turkana reject the Jie-type restraints on initiation and prefer to initiate males in young adulthood? (Gulliver 1958, 921)."

The political scientist Harald Müller suggests one answer. He identifies three periods in Turkana history when marriages were not legally carried out because of sever loss of cattle.[13] Young adults formed unions and had children in any case, however, without any exchange of cattle for bridewealth, their offspring would belong to their grandparents and therefore share the same generation as their parents (Müller 1989, 138). The accumulative effect of these events was to collapse the generations creating the alternations that Gulliver later observed.

The case of the Nyangatom, another tribe in the Karimojong cluster might help explain how a change in the generational system could result in a weakened authority of elders. According to the anthropologist Serge Tornay (1998), the Nyangatom generational system was "blocked" at the beginning of the 20th Century, when the senior generation failed to became the "Fathers of the country" due to the conquest of the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik. Menelik usurped the position of the Father thus depriving the senior generation of their status. Never becoming true (*de jure*) Fathers, they could not initiate the succeeding generation of Sons. When this junior generation eventually demanded to

---

[12] The Jie are an ancestral tribe to the Turkana, who broke away from them when they migrated into the Rift Valley. Gulliver also writes about the Jie age organization (Gulliver 1953). The Karimojong have also maintained intact their generational system (see N. Dyson-Hudson 1963).

[13] The first episode occurred in the early 19th century when a vanguard of young adults migrated to the shores of Lake Turkana where they suffered a severe drought and loss of livestock. The next episode was the Labur Campaign of 1918 when the British set out to pacify the Turkana by confiscating all their livestock (Müller 1989, 146). The Turkana herds were decimated and further diminished the following year by disease and famine. Another severe drought and famine in the 1930s, cost the Turkana three-quarters of their livestock, again preventing the exchange of bridewealth and formal marriages (ibid. 147).

be initiated, the seniors refused. The juniors then attacked the seniors with sticks. In

response, the fathers cursed their sons for bucking the system: "If you eventually accept

initiation which has been refused to us, may you all die!"[14]

Generational system as an affective system

Since violence is associated with emotions, emotions should be considered in an

analysis of violence. The anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt sees affect as a missing key

to understanding human behavior and evolution. What he calls *affect hunger* is rooted in

both nurturant and sexual love. He writes, "Human society has used the sentiments of the

nursery to shape and order community social relationships (Goldschmidt 2006, 114)."

According to Goldschmidt, it is ritual that transmits and extends these feelings. Ritual is

the "language of sentiment, "the second mode of communication"(Goldschmidt 2006,

40).

Gulliver writes that the Turkana age-set system connects men in "a coherent

system" of "regulated links."[15] However he could easily have written that age-sets are "a

coherent system of *affective* links," as evident in his following description:

> It appears to an outsider that the integrative effects, the sense of communion and
> of belonging to the age-group, are highly accentuated by the emotional and
> physical impact of the group-dancing as the men rhythmically stamp and move
> together in a tight bunch, singing and miming as they go. In my experience, the
> Turkana are notably inarticulate but they do talk of feelings of great pleasure and
> of their sense of unity on these occasions. (Gulliver 1958, 915)

---

[14] Tornay suggests that if this junior generation set decides to initiate itself, the Nyangatom would develop a
system comparable to the Turkana system of alternations.

[15] Gulliver does write about the affective component of the age groups. He notes, "there is a conscious
feeling of amity and similarity of interests, problems, and desires among members of an age-group
(Gulliver 1958, 914)."

Fraternal feelings do count among age-mates and between the generations filial feelings also apply as Neville Dyson-Hudson indicates in regard to the Karimojong:

> The affectionate respect, deference, and obedience which mark the junior generation-set's relationship with the elders is not merely analogous to a father-son relationship in Karimojong society but is a transposition, on a group scale and into public context, of actual filial relationships which obtain between the majority of members in both generation-sets. (N. Dyson-Hudson, N. 1963, 383)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Turkana generational system with its associated ritual and sentiments helped to constitute the authority of elders. However, with the collapse of that system, elders lost their prestige, respect, and ability to control their juniors. Today, for some young Turkana men, the fraternal sentiments that bind together Ngoroko bands of young adults trump their feelings for parents, children, and women, freeing them to exercise their predatory practices.

References

Abbink, Jon. 2007. Culture slipping away: Violence, social tension and personal drama in Suri society, southern Ethiopia. In Aparna Rao, Michael Bollig and Monika Böck (eds.) *The Practice of War: Production, Reproduction and Communication of Armed Violence*. New York: Berghahn Books

Buchannan-Smith, Margie and Jeremy Lind. 2005. *Armed Violence and Poverty in Northern Kenya: A Case Study for the Armed Violence and Poverty Initiative*. Centre for International Cooperation and Security, Department of Peace Studies, Bradford University, UK.

Crummey, Donald. 1986. Introduction: 'The great beast'. In Donald Crummey (ed.) *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, pp.

Dyson-Hudson, Neville. 1963. The Karimojong Age System. *Ethnology* 2 (3): 353-401

Dyson-Hudson, Rada. 1999. Turkana in time perspective. In Michael A. Little and Paul W. Leslie (eds.) *Turkana Herders of the Dry Savanna: Ecology and Biobehavioral Response of Nomads To an Uncertain Environment*. New York: Oxford, pp. 24-40

Eriksen, Siri and Jeremy Lind. 2005. The impacts of conflict on household vulnerability to climate stress: Evidence from Turkana and Kitui Districts in Kenya. Paper presented at *Human Security and Climate Change International Workshop*, Oslo, Norway, 21-23 June 2005

Goldschmidt, Walter. 2006. *Bridge to Humanity: How Affect Hunger Trips the Selfish Gene*. New York: Oxford University Press

Goldsmith, Paul. 1997. Cattle, Khat, and Guns: Trade, Conflict, and Security on northern Kenya's Highland-Lowland Interface. Conflict and Conflict Management in the Horn of Africa Case Study. APPEAL-KENYA: Aid for Pastoral Peoples Education and Livelihood

Gulliver, P. H. 1958. The Turkana age organization. *American Anthropologist* 60:900-922
_____ 1953. The age-set organization of the Jie tribe. *JRAI* 83 (2): 147-68

Krätli, Saverio and Jeremy Swift. 1999. *Understanding and Managing Pastoral Conflict in Kenya: A Literature Review*. Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK

Lamphear, John. 1992. *The Scattering Time: Turkana Responses to Colonial Rule*. New York: Oxford University Press

McCabe, Terrence. 2004. *Cattle Bring Us to Our Enemies: Turkana Ecology, Politics and Raiding in a Disequilibrium System*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

Müller, Harald K. 1989. *Changing Generations: Dynamics of Generation and Age-Sets in Southeastern Sudan (Toposa) and Northwestern Kenya (Turkana)*. Fort Lauderdale: Verlag breitenbach Publishers.

Pike, Ivy L., Belinda Straight, Matthias Oesterle, Charles Hilton, and Adamson Lanyasunya. 2009. Documenting the health consequences of the endemic warfare in three pastoralist communities of northern Kenya: A conceptual framework. *Social Science & Medicine* 70: 45-52

Tournay, Serge A. M. 1998. Generational Systems on the Threshold of the Third Millenium: An Anthropological Perspective. In Eisei Kurimoto and Simon Simonse (eds.) *Conflict, Age & Power in North East Africa: Age Systems in Transition*. Oxford: James Currey, pp. 98-120

Witsenburg, Karen M. and Wario R. Adano. 2009. Of Rains and Raids: Violent Livestock Raiding in Northern Kenya. *Civil Wars* 11: 4, 514-538