

ISSN 2373-6615 (Print); ISSN 2373-6631 (Online)

# Dialectics of War and Peace: The Pokot Alternate Regimes of War and Peace

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#### Abstract

For a long time outsider-led conflict interventions aimed at addressing violent conflicts between and among communities straddling northern Kenya and eastern Uganda have been less than satisfactory, only managing to achieve temporary ceasefire and short episodes of relative peace. Given such persistent failure of these efforts, this study sought to establish whether the cultural system of the Pokot people (and her neighbors) is responsible for rendering such efforts ineffective. The study adopted a qualitative approach with interviews and focus group discussions as data collection methods. The study established that the generation-set system of the Pokot people (and her Ateker cluster neighbors) which produces century-long alternating regimes of war and peace is responsible for the unending interethnic cattle raiding. Secondly, outsider-led conflict interventions in the past decades were unsuccessful because of inadequate understanding of the context (generation-set system and conflict), perceiving the conflict as influenced by factors outside the pastoralists' context and failure to seek working conflict interventions inherent in pastoral cultural systems. To increase chances of success in peace efforts among these communities, peace actors need to look more into the cultural systems for underlying foundations that sustain conflict in particular ethnic and interethnic setting in order innovate culturally-relevant and working conflict interventions. Further research is needed to establish whether these communities have mechanisms to hasten processes of power handover to the regime of peace.

**Keywords:** peace-conflict dialectic, regime of war, regime of peace, conflict interventions, culture, generation-set, ngimor, ngetei



#### Introduction

The Pokot, Karamojong, Turkana, Sabiny, Samburu and Marakwet who straddle the region from eastern Uganda to northern Kenya have been in constant conflict since it was first documented by European explorers who described them as "wild" and "warlike" (Barber, 1968; Smith, 1900). The Turkana, in particular, were described as "an extremely aggressive tribe" (Brasnett, 1958, p. 118) and a "people of treacherous character" (Barber, 1968, p. 73).

The Pokot, then referred to as Suk and the subject of this paper, have been in cattle rustling conflict with Karamojong (Uganda), Turkana (Kenya), Sabiny (Uganda and Kenya), Samburu (Kenya) and Marakwet (Kenya) communities. Cattle raiding, pastoral conflict and cattle rustling are used interchangeably in this paper. Many interventions by the state and non-state actors have largely failed to end cattle raiding culture between the Pokot and her raiding neighbors. This failure has been blamed on both the peace actors' ineffective interventions and the communities' unwillingness to change from cattle raiding culture.

This study sought to examine whether the cultural system of the Pokot (and her neighbors) is responsible for the failure of past conflict interventions in producing long term peace. To do this, the study explored the Pokot generation-set system dynamics and its relationship with conflict and peace between the Pokot and her neighbors. A particular attention was on how the generation-set system facilitates peace or conflict.

#### **Related Literature**

Cattle rustling literature can be broadly summed up in four themes: motivations to cattle raiding, role of small arms, cattle rustling interventions, impact of cattle raiding and peace actors. Whereas the issues studied and debated around this conflict are varied and wide, this paper restricts itself to culture as an infrastructure supporting peace and conflict, history, motivations to cattle rustling, and the past conflict interventions.

Culture as an infrastructure for peace and conflict

Culture is one of the key drivers to raiding. On a more theoretical sphere, culture operates as a dynamic and rigid structure. That duality of existence of culture makes possible preservation and sustenance of cultural practices and equally allows change in whole or in part. As a rigid structure, culture indoctrinates its members through rites and rituals into particular identities to systematize their perceptions of reality into the mainstream cultural reality (LeBaron, 2001). Culture does not only provide us with our cultural perspective of reality, it locates and positions it within and/or outside that reality thereby directing our actions.

As a dynamic structure, culture can facilitate change. As LeBaron (2001) observes: "culture is neither a formidable fortress nor a dispensable platform; it is an integral part of existence that has the potential to serve as an important resource in transforming intercultural conflict" (p. 2). It means peace cannot be made outside the provisions of culture because culture guides "how conflicts are staged and how they are brought to close" (Somjee, 2000). For peace actors, culture provides both the opportunities and means for making peace. The cultural perceptions about peace, conflict and conflict interventions can be defining factors for success of a peace effort.



The culture's ability to resist certain changes and stay responsive to prevailing pressures for change make societies relatively dynamic and sustainable systems. Cultures adjust to prevailing pressures by responding to either inevitable changes (change is the only option) or persuasions (e.g., innovations) from its environment. Both of these processes (inevitable forces and persuasion) can also occur simultaneously.

### Cattle rustling in the past and present

Cattle rustling is not a new development among East African pastoralists. The Pokot, Sabiny, Karamojong and Turkana have raided each other for livestock for centuries (Austin, 1899; Leff, 2009). Studies on cattle rustling in the last three decades have suggested that cattle raids have become more devastating due to access to small arms (Mkutu, 2003), loss of traditional authority (Akabwai & Ateyo, 2007) and commercialization of cattle raids (Eaton, 2010). The impression by these studies that cattle raids have become more frequent, more violent and more devastating in its livestock and human costs has been blamed on access to small arms (Gray, 2000). However, analysis of historical reports suggests that cattle raiding is as bad as it was more than a century ago (Knighton, 2007).

A critic of the view that small arms have exacerbated cattle raiding, Knighton (2002) observed that the researchers may have been influenced by regional and global trends in inter-ethnic conflicts associated with access to small arms. His observation points to researchers' temptation to anchor and situate local problems within the global patterns and trends. Cattle rustling is entrenched in the pastoral cultures; it is a problem unique and internal to pastoralists' culture and identity. It would be more instrumental to pay more attention to more culturally intrinsic drivers that sustain this pastoral conflict in order to develop working models from within their cultural systems.

Much of cattle rustling literature is awash with gloom and doom that portrays pastoralists as a people perpetually at war hence failing to notice their peacemaking character. Pastoralists have, albeit brief, episodes of peace after war most of which result from intercommunity peace pacts (Turpin, 1948). They are also kind to each other especially in times of need. In most instances, peace pacts are initiated by the weaker party, often suffering from consequences of either drought, livestock disease or depleted pasture (Lando & Kochomay, 2016). Request for ceasefire or peace pact by the weaker party is always granted suggesting that these raiding communities are not the kind of enemies that seek to wipe out each other from the face of the earth.

#### Motivations to cattle raiding

Commercialization of cattle raiding (Eaton, 2010), political incitements (Adan & Pkalya, 2005), poverty (Mkutu, 2003), traditional values (Goldsmith, 2005), illiteracy (Cheserek et al., 2012), women pester power (Watson, 2003), hero culture of celebrating raiders and mocking non-raiders (Cheserek et al., 2012), cattle rustling as an expression of historical claims, restricted movement and land privatization (Goldsmith, 2005), drought and dry season resource scarcities (Leff, 2009), proliferation of small arms (Mkutu, 2003), state underinvestment in the pastoral areas (Leff, 2009) and loss of traditional authority (Akabwai & Ateyo, 2007) are some of the motivations to cattle rustling conflict that have been extensively discussed. These factors have been presented as key drivers to cattle raiding among pastoralists.

Although this list of motivations to cattle rustling problem is skewed toward variables external to pastoralists, traditional values and traditional authority represent motivations that point the responsibility



to pastoralists' cattle raiding culture. There are a number of inaccuracies in the way these motivations have been framed and explained. The claim that cattle raiding is motivated by the need for bride price by young men who want to marry is inaccurate. As established by Knighton (2007), raided stock is neither sufficient nor a primary source for bride wealth as the raided loot is often shared by relatives and friends. Further, cattle raiding is not just an exclusive non-literate affair, educated individuals are also directly involved (Knighton, 2002). The claim that cattle rustling among pastoralists is an outcome of colonial or post-colonial administrative decisions as implied by Goldsmith (2005) or resource scarcity as claimed by Leff (2009) ignores the fact that the earliest European explorers found pastoralists at war with each other. For resource scarcity, pastoralist for centuries have developed superior socio-cultural adaptation to environmental vagaries and consequences including striking peace deals in times of distress and crises (Lando & Kochomay, 2016).

Whereas their claims of loss of traditional authority may have merit, there is implicit rule that even when elders have not sanctioned raids, they legitimize them once appeased by the raiders who must slaughter raided oxen for elders to feast on. The collective age grade punishment (ameto) is still practiced among the Karamojong (Knighton, 2007) and the Pokot.

#### Cattle rustling conflict interventions

To governments and other external development actors, cattle rustling has been and is still a problem that needs to be resolved. From colonial administration, many state and non-state interventions aimed at bringing an end to cattle raiding culture have not succeeded. Disarmament operations, depastoralization policies, and livestock branding have been popularly used by the state. Disarmament, the most popular of the interventions since colonial era has not produced a lasting peace and security but often leaves the disarmed group at the mercies of their armed traditional enemies. Disarmament occurs as military operation where military forces are deployed to a designated community to mop up arms. These disarmament operations have been accused of committing atrocities against civilians (Stites & Akabwai, 2010). These military interventions have been ineffective because of their failure to procure cooperation from the communities and the government's inability to provide security after disarmament (ISS, 2009).

The post-colonial governments in the region continued the colonial *depastoralization* legacy of enacting legislations, adopting policies on land ownership and public underinvestment in pastoral areas designed to discourage pastoralism (Leff, 2009). These laws and policies were meant to curtail movement and subdue pastoralists into sedentary culture. Livestock branding has also been used as a means to ease tracing raided cattle. All these state efforts have not achieved much perhaps because they were based on inaccurate understanding of underlying cultural motivations for cattle rustling.

The non-state peace actors have also made effort at resolving the cattle raiding problem. An assessment of some of the non-state efforts including POKATUSA peace project is documented in reasonable detail in Lando and Kochomay (2016). Relative to state interventions, efforts by non-state actors get positive reception from the communities; however, fruits of their efforts are often either cut short by state actions such as disarmament or wind up because of their short life span.

## Generation-sets, conflict and peace

One feature of East African pastoralists is their social stratification by generations and age-set



systems. Substantially detailed work on generation-set system of Karamoja cluster communities have been done by Gulliver (1953), Dyson-Hudson (1963, 1966), Lamphear (1976), Müller-Dempf (1989, 2009, 2017) and Knighton (1990, 2002, 2007). Their works provide detailed description of generational organization, variations of generation-set systems among communities and power dynamics between generation-sets as well as within generation-sets.

On a more general scope, generations-sets serve several functions among pastoral communities. They reduce rivalry, offer rules that aid settling conflicts, ease access to assistance away from home and make it easy for quick mobilization of community members whenever needed (Müller-Dempf, 2017). Because each generation-set knows its place in the social and political strata, chances of conflict of roles between generation-sets and age-sets within each generation-set are reduced. The generation-set system demarcates boundaries of what one can do or cannot within or without presence of either a higher or lower generation-set. It assigns more power to senior generations and by so doing makes the chain of command explicit. In Karamojong culture, "ameto", a collective punishment of members of junior set by members of senior set is used when a member from a junior set acts in a grossly disrespectful way to a member or members of senior sets (Knighton, 1990).

The Pokot system, which has greater similarity to Karimojong, has two alternating generation-sets, "Ngimor" and "Ngetei" (Müller-Dempf, 2017). Symbolic of membership in respective generation sets, Ngimor wears red copper ornaments (e.g. bangles, fingerings and earrings) while Ngetei wears golden colored ones. Like in Karimojong system, every male by default becomes a member of generation-set of his paternal grandfather. When a generation-set in power retires, the power is handed over to the next generation-set through an elaborate succession ceremony. More detailed variations in practices of generation-sets among Ateker communities (Karamoja cluster) are well documented in Müller-Dempf (1989, 2009, 2017). Whereas substantial research on generation-sets among the Ateker communities has been documented, little is published about the Pokot generation-set system and the relationship to cattle rustling conflict.

#### **Research Methodology**

This study took a qualitative approach with informant interviews and focus groups discussions as key data collection methods. The study was conducted in Pokot North Sub County (Kenya) and Amudat District (Uganda). This area hosts section of the Pokot with long history of contact with Karamojong, Tepes, Sabiny and the Turkana communities.

Informants were drawn from elders and non-state peace actors. Elders were instrumental in providing information relating to generation-set system dynamics while non-state actors provided insight into the reasons behind failure of decades of interventions on cattle raiding conflict. The interviews were conducted between November 2016 and February 2018. Three focus group discussions of elders, peace actors and warriors were also conducted in February 2018.

#### **Findings**

Generation-set system as social and political organizing structure

In the Pokot culture, the generation-set system is an organizing structure providing to its members



with the roadmap to their place and respective obligations in and within the social and political stratification. The Pokot culture has two generation-sets that alternate in such a way that one generation-set ascends to power and stays in power for at least a century then hands over power to the next generation-set. These sets have opposite mandates: Ngimor's mandate is to pursue war (regime of war) while Ngetei's is to pursue peace (regime of peace). Whichever regime is in power, the community members know the relevant aspirations to pursue. As summed up by L. Merikori (personal communication, May12, 2017), "Trying to make peace in regime of war is not the right thing; people know it won't succeed."

## Generation-set identities as a negative and positive force for peace and conflict

The deep-rootedness of cultural practices such as regimes of war and regimes of peace can serve as negative organizing force against efforts toward peace or can serve as positive organizing force for peace. The fact that it is within the awareness of the community members that when Ngimor generation-set is in power no peace pact can last, opens up a window within which a group of community members can choose to disrupt existing peace and instead of being treated as a violation of the peace deal, it becomes accepted as a fate - it was going to happen anyway. A. Losili's (personal communication, June 22, 2017) remark, "I tell you, no peace or stability is with Ngimor in power, they are cursed to war and misfortune," reveals deep-rootedness of cultural notions about reigning generation-set system expectations. The belief that no long-term peace will happen with regime of war and the acceptance that it was bound to happen work against achieving long term peace. One member in the Elders' focus group discussion said: "Ngimor's reign is of war, it is time for raiding and Ngetei when they come [to power] will stop war, it will be time of no raiding" (Elders, personal communication, February 10, 2018). This implies a consensus that time for war must be time for war, not peace.

#### Generation-set as a political regime

The generation-set in power is a political regime mandated to manage all aspects of community life. From the elders' focus group discussion, the generation-set in power is responsible for making community-wide decisions ranging from religious (rituals, ceremonies), natural resource sharing, negotiating and approving negotiations with other polities on matters relating to resource use, peace or war. In the Pokot belief system, the regime of peace (Ngetei) comes in with good fortunes and the community is expected to experience peace, stability and prosperity during their reign but when the regime of war (Ngimor) takes over, the hell breaks loose with war, natural disasters and other misfortunes that arise as a result of poor decisions or naturally occurring circumstances.

On ascending to power a generation-set earns the right to pursue its mandate which is war or peace for Ngimor and Ngetei generation-sets respectively. When Ngimor ascends to power, the regime of war reigns; "theirs is to wage war on the ethnic enemies" (W. Atukoi, personal communication, May 13, 2017). This regime is also associated with poverty, instability and other misfortunes. When Ngetei ascends to power, "the regime is of peace, we know God (Töroröt) and nature will give us peace, plenty, stability and prosperity. All good things will follow their leadership" (L. Riamangorok, personal communication, November 14, 2016).

In the desire for exceptional record for their legacies, the regime in power must do as much as it can to surpass the previous regimes of their kind. For instance, a regime of war will wage as much war and exhaust all war opportunities to outdo the previous war regime. In such competition, "Ngimor



(regime of war) brings as much destruction to their enemy and in the same measure attract as much destruction and war to their people" (N. Lopira, personal communication, November 14, 2016). During their turn, the peace regime with its energy will work as much but to bring peace, stability and prosperity for "Ngetei were blessed with the heart for peace from time immemorial; theirs is to ensure there is peace within their community and with their ethnic neighbors" (A. Lochom, personal communication, November 17, 2016).

Power dynamics in the Pokot generation-set system and unending conflict

Power dynamics in the Pokot generation-set system is to a large extent responsible for sustained conflict between Pokot and her neighbors for more than a century. Ngimor's unwillingness to hand over power to Ngetei (regime of peace) explains the unending cattle raiding problem between the Pokot and her neighbors. But how did this regime manage to break the norm? First, Ngimor cunningly understood every step of power handover process and found a weak point within the process where if skipped will undermine legitimacy of the process. Secondly, they understood that they were the one with power and mandate to make such decisions but chose otherwise. The process of power hand over and the generation-set timelines illustrate the Pokot generation-set power dynamics and the unending pastoral conflict.

In the account of the elders' focus group discussion, the transition from peace to war or from war to peace regimes involves a procedure of rituals conducted in prescribed ritual sites within specified timelines and in a particular order by the ritual expert, usually a seer. If the ceremonial and ritual processes are pronounced successful by the ritual expert, the eventual end is the handing over power to the designate generation-set who will hold power for the next 100 years before handing it over to the next generation-set. Just like in modern governments, power handover involves ritualistic and symbolic transfer of instruments of power to the incoming government. In the Pokot generation-set context, the instrument of power that must be handed over ritually and symbolically at a central site to the most senior member or members of incoming generation-set who will ritually cut it to signify complete transfer of power is the "amuro" (right hind of an ox). After the central handover, each settlement or village will schedule their handover rituals.

Pokot oral references and historical records provide a sketch of Pokot generation-set system of power dynamics and the persistence of pastoral conflict.

- 1850s: Ngetei (regime of peace) were in power until about the 1850s when they handed over power to Ngimor who had piled pressure on Ngetei to hand over power to allow them (Ngimor) to go to war. Ngetei bowed to the pressure and gave-in to the demands of the war-yearning Ngimor leading to a ritual process that involved burying symbols of peace, stability, wealth and prosperity to usher in a regime of war (Elders, personal communication, February 3, 2018). Handing over power means giving decision making authority to generation-set in power. In their war of domination endeavor, Ngimor were successful in their early years of reign defeating and driving away Orkom (Oropom) and Maasai (Brasnett, 1958; Robbins, 2010; Wakefield & Johnson, 1870).
- 1890s: The brief success was disrupted by defeats, counter raids, animal diseases (rinderpest and scab) and small pox epidemic rendering the Pokot weak and unable to wage successful battles on their enemies (Barber, 1968; Bollig, 2006; Turpin, 1948).
- 1920s: To survive raids from their neighbors, they adopted a diplomatic scheme by seeking peace from their neighbors leading to the Pokot, Karamojong Turkana and Sabiny peace pact in the 1920s



at two ritual sites witnessed by colonial administrators of both Kenya and Uganda (Barber, 1968). The Pokot ritual expert had directed Ngimor to hand over power to Ngetei (regime of peace) for long-term peace and stability but Ngimor did not like the idea of giving away power and did not therefore implement rituals as required to allow power handover (Elders, personal communication, February 3, 2018).

- 1965: Rituals in the third site were delayed until 1965 but still power was not handed over to regime of peace (Ngetei). Because the instrument of power and authority ("amuro") was never handed over, Ngimor continued to hold power and the rights that come with it.
- 1990s: A new cycle of handing over rituals began in the 1990s but was interrupted by Kenya and Uganda disarmament operations targeting cross border pastoralists.
- 2015: The 1990s cycle resumed in 2015 (Elders, personal communication, February 3, 2018). Just the way political regimes wish to hold power a little longer, this is what happened to Pokot generation-sets power handover. Ngimor generation-set had delayed handover to allow itself a longer stay in power. The strain in the generation-set power handover is the underlying factor for the unending conflict between the Pokot and her neighbors.

## Pastoralists, peace actors and peace outcomes

Pastoralists are shy to tell external actors the truth about the certainty of the failure of their peace efforts. One non-state peace actor expressed his experience with pastoralists in these words:

When they (pastoral communities) come to your meetings, they listen very attentively, in dead silence, no interruptions and one, two or three of them speak on behalf of the rest in support of peace. Their faces tell they are honest. But you will be a disappointed lad at the end of your three year peace project. (S. Zacheas, personal communication, October 10, 2017)

From this peace actor's observation, we can draw some inferences. First, peace actors rely largely on the host communities' willingness to genuinely support their peace efforts. The judgment on whether the hosts are willing, open and supportive depends on the peace actor. It also reveals that cultures are closed systems with mechanisms for dealing with out-groups. This study has established that in spite of their knowledge of the outcome of a peace initiative (internally or externally-driven), these pastoralists are unwilling to forthrightly discourage the peace actors. It is a face-saving norm. Based on their understanding of the mandates of the generation-set in power, they can predict with certainty the success or failure of a peace initiative. The failure of outsider-led interventions to achieve a lasting peace between the Pokot and her neighbors for decades can be attributed to the host's knowledge that no long-term peace can be expected during the regime of war. Their participation in the peace efforts is therefore a face saving act – peace is not part of the expected outcome.

#### Looking-in: Cracking cultural system's peace code

For more successful peace efforts, peace actors have better chances of success if they avoid adopting templates in inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts from other contexts. *POKATUSA*, one of the peace projects well remembered by the communities began with trust and consensus building methods from the host cultures (Peace Actors, personal communication, February 8, 2018) but whose efforts were disrupted by Uganda disarmament program in early 2000. This illustrates the significance of seeking



opportunities from the host culture and the means provided by the culture to exploit those opportunities. There are virgin revelations and opportunities within cultural systems for enhancing peace outcomes.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

#### Conclusion

The cultural system of the Pokot (and her neighbors) is responsible for the unending interethnic cattle raiding.

- 1) As social and political organizing structure, the Pokot (and Karamojong) generation-set system produce alternate regimes of war and peace, each with a reign period of not less than a century. For more than a century, the regime of war has been in power and that explains the unending cattle raids between the Pokot and her neighbors.
- 2) The regime in power receives power and authority to make political, religious, sociocultural and economic decisions but through culturally prescribed process. With its authority, it can repeal existing or introduce new cultural practices (sociocultural) or change the nature of cultural power structure (political). From this view, Pokot generation-set system presents an opportunity for peace that change agents can exploit. The peace actors' hasty peace projects have failed to notice these opportunities.
- 3) Ngimor, the regime of war, has clung on power for more than a century and their unwillingness to hand over power to Ngetei is one of the underlying forces that has sustained inter-ethnic cattle raiding.
- 4) Outsider-driven conflict interventions came at the wrong time, were based on wrong assumptions, and failed to understand underlying conflict drivers. These interventions were based on models that did not take into account the complexity of conflict and cultures of these cattle raiding communities. *Recommendation*

The study makes the following recommendations. That peace actors in pastoral conflict need to adopt a long range approach which must begin with seeking more deeper understanding of the people, culture and the conflict dynamics. Policy makers equally need to give indigenous mechanisms more attention in respect of addressing pastoral conflict. This study has pointed to the fact that pastoral communities make peace with themselves in absence of external actors. That needs to be supported more. This study also invites researchers to do more research on practices embedded in pastoral cultures that promote and sustain cattle raiding.

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