

THE CENTRALITY OF CATTLE IN THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE EAST POKOT PASTORALISTS OF NORTH WESTERN KENYA

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Abstract

This paper discusses the centrality of cattle in the social organization of the East Pokot pastoralists. From early childhood, adolescence to maturity including all rites of passage, cattle is at the centre of all these practices. Relationships are conceived, maintained and dissolved over cattle. Gender relations are strongly patterned alongside cattle, hence the saying “*better walk with a cow than with a woman*” tells all about the position of a woman in relation of cattle in the East Pokot community. This paper seeks to explain the importance of cattle and the intensity of values and practices around cattle. The argument is that for the East Pokot, cattle is invested with certain values whose logic falls outside economic or capitalist dynamics.

Keywords: East Pokot, Pastoralists, Cattle Complex, Social Organization

1.0 Introduction

The East Pokot pastoralists are part of the Nilotic speaking and cattle keeping peoples of Kenya. They inhabit one of the driest areas of Kenya. They are known to be the most astute keepers of cattle. This paper presents who they are, the origin of their obsession for cattle and how cattle is embedded in their social organization. The overly strong attachment to cattle is presented as initially captured in the colonial period to the present.

1.1 Geographic Area of East Pokot

In terms of mobility, the East Pokot is largely inaccessible. There are hardly motorable tracks yet the landscape is dissected by numerous seasonal

rivers. The tarmac road from Nakuru abruptly ends just outside the administrative area at Loruk. An anonymous evaluator of a development project reported as follows,

generally, infrastructure is grossly inadequate and in many places non-existent. The economic potential of the area would not justify additional expensive infrastructure, therefore it cannot be expected that infrastructure will be improved and/or expected to improve in foreseeable future (cited in Ambruster and Odegi, 1995).

However, historical and current evidence consistently show that East Pokot have large herds of livestock, hence it is not correct to state that the area has low economic potential to justify further infrastructure investment. For instance it was estimated that there are 7000 donkeys, 3500 camels, 20,000 sheep, 100,000 goats and 50,000 cattle in East Pokot (Saltlick, 1991). These figures have continued to grow with time, as indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Livestock Population (estimates)*

Livestock species	Number 2008	Number 2009	% + or -
Cattle	115,000	110,900	-3
Goats	199,500	182,300	-8.7
Sheep	99,750	89,000	-11
Camels	8,900	9,600	7
Donkeys	2,200	2,600	8
Indigenous poultry	94,500	95,500	1
Dairy cattle	12	20	60

Source: Ministry of Livestock Chemolingot, 2009.

*Figures based on 90%-95% presentation of livestock for vaccination.

The livestock figures as shown in Table 1 above imply a very high concentration of cattle in the area. From the 1991 figures to 2008 and 2009, the cattle population doubled in less than a decade. The low cattle figures in 2009 compared to 2008 was a result of a prolonged drought in 2009 which led to massive livestock losses and prolonged migration.

According to the 2009 population census East Pokot population was 63,649 (21,931 female and 41,718 male). The population growth rate is 2.65% with a literacy level of 66% male and 55% female. Although the literacy level is relatively high that has not persuaded them to adopt new attitudes towards cattle. East Pokot region has 64-74% population living below the poverty line and contributes 1-2% poverty to national poverty level (Republic of Kenya, 2005). Of the population in East Pokot 34,438 are classified as poor. In terms of ranking, the constituency is 109 out of the total of 210. A 58% of the total population have no education, 39% have primary and 33% secondary and above education (Republic of Kenya, 2005).

East Pokot has many seasonal rivers – Nginyang, Kositei, Suguta Marmar, Chesanja while Kerio is the only permanent river on the extreme

westerly side bordering the Marakwet. All the rivers flow to the northerly direction to drain into Lake Turkana. Most of the rivers rise from the Tugen Hills but Suguta Marmar rises from the easterly direction along the Laikipia escarpment. The higher grounds include Mts. Silali, Tiati and the Kerio Valley escarpment. All the higher grounds constitute the bulk of the dry season pastures. The lower drier areas and the higher elevations provide a conducive environment for cattle-keeping. Although the higher elevations are considered risky given their proximity to their traditional enemies – the Turkana and Samburu pastoralists but that does not deter the East Pokot from accessing them when they have to in the dry season. The East Pokot will take any risk including going to no go areas as long as the survival of cattle is concerned.

1.2 Historical Origins of the East Pokot

Stewart (1950) (quoted in Republic of Kenya, 1950) termed people of East Pokot as the Suk and that they were roughly 60% pastoral and 40% agricultural. They broke off from the original Nandi settlement on Mt. Elgon and represent the most primitive form of Nandi. Their language is Nandi in structure and in much of the vocabulary. The Suk call themselves Pokot (*pronounced Pokaut*). Suk is the name given to them by the Maasai because they lived in the hills and carried a “*chok*” which is a short curved bill-hook, probably for cultivation. Suk is also a Maasai name for ignorant people who were inhabiting the hills. This shows the Suk or East Pokot were agriculturalists, although they are now entirely pastoralists. Initially they lived in the territory towards the Western end of Cheregani Hills at Mt. Sekerr (most probably Mt. Elgon). After some experience with the Karimojong and Turkana, they acquired many of their customs such as the singing, baboon dance and *sapanarite* of passage before they moved to the lowlands. The diet of the East Pokot people consisted of finger millet, honey and game. They dared not come to the plains because the Samburu would not allow them in the Kerio Valley while the Turkana blocked their movement to the north west. Later the Samburu left Kerio Valley and moved eastwards. This allowed the East Pokot to descend from the Hills and occupy the land vacated by the Samburu. They eventually pushed as far as Tiati Hills but were prevented from going further by the Maasai. Beech (1910), (cited in the Republic of Kenya 1950) described the East Pokot as;

intelligent but surprisingly honest, exceptionally vain but very generous. Suspicious of one’s motives, selfish and without affection. A savage and uncivilized people to whom death is the greatest evil and who have but a short span of life

Later on an anonymous colonial District Commissioner said that the East Pokot:

are very backward and conservative to a degree and it will be a long uphill task to win their confidence and secure any active interest and support from them to any scheme which may be inaugurated for their benefit (n.d).

The frustration of the colonial administration was after the East Pokot refused to cooperate with successive governments to accept education, Christianity and health, only embracing veterinary service since they improved cattle. This means that anything to do with cattle was better than all others. The Pokot are divided into two subgroups: the agricultural and pastoral. This paper focuses on the pastoral group. The difference between the agriculturalists and pastoralists among the Pokot is clear, including their customs and physique. The pastoralists (now the East Pokot) are rich in cattle, goats and sheep and look with disdain upon the agriculturalists to whom they refer as “*the men of the seed*”. The agriculturalists (the West Pokot) have infused crop based cultivation with livestock husbandry, hence pass more accurately as agro-pastoralists. The agriculturalists are very inferior to the pastoralists in physique, due to the fact that their diet consist almost entirely of sorghum (and now maize) varied occasionally with little goat meat. The pastoralists (East Pokot, in Baringo District) are in the drier plains. Their mode of living is simple and befits a people who are constantly moving with families and herds in search of water and grazing. Their food consists of blood and milk varied by a little grain. A Republic of Kenya Report(1951) noted of the East Pokot that their wealth of cattle makes them rank with the Maasai as the most opulent Africans and their wants outside their stock are negligible. The pastoralists of East Pokot are divided into four main clans. The Talai/Kasait clan is predominantly in Churo Area, Cheprai/Kaprai occupy the central part including Chemolingot/Nginyang region, the Kolowa clan is in Kerio Valley while Cheman clan in Chepkalacha region. All these clans have a long history of cattle ownership, to which I now turn.

1.3 The Origin of the East Pokot Obsession with Cattle and its Centrality in Social Organisation

Interviews with East Pokot elders in Tangelbei, Amaya, Chepkalacha, Maron, Chesawach, Kapedo and Kolowa showed that their obsession with cattle is based on their myth of origin. That God (*Tororot*) on Mt. Mtelo created the first Pokot man and gave him cattle. No other community was given cattle, hence all cattle are theirs. They dispute the notion that they steal livestock from other communities. To them, other communities (*ket walak*) traditionally do not own livestock by right. So they go for them to bring them back home. Hence the East Pokot world view is what accounts for their strong emphasis on cattle. As initially observed by Le

Baron (1999) a world view can be a resource for understanding and analyzing true stories, rituals, myths and metaphors used by a group, learn efficiently and deeply about their identities, what matters to them and how they make meaning. It is because of this cultural/mythical view of cattle that it has come to occupy such a central place in their social organization.

The social organization of the East Pokot is closely embedded on cattle. In this section, the paper presents some of the key aspects of social organization that define the East Pokot and the centrality of cattle in them. Specifically we focus on cultural and other social practices that affirm the East Pokot's identity among themselves and their environment. Some of these practices include rites of passage.

a) Circumcision of Young Males

Traditionally, the East Pokot circumcise their male youth as a cultural requirement that precedes full admission into the community as adults with full rights and special responsibilities. Circumcision as a cultural practice also reinforces the place of cattle among the East Pokot. It is one of the few practices that allow for slaughtering of cattle- a pointer to the value attached to the cultural practice and cattle. In terms of the ritual itself, the youth about to be circumcised brew some beer. Once it is ready the elders are called for a beer drinking party which is followed by drumming and singing at night in a cattle *boma*. Everybody – men, women and children take part in the festivities. Once they are over, the elders and “*laioni*”(the ritual leader) proceed in the early morning to the river where the youth to be circumcised bathe. The elders cut sticks from the bushes around and go through a ritual which consists of threats and intimidation of corporal punishment for any youth who shows signs of fear during circumcision. The youth are allowed to relieve themselves and proceed to the nearest hill where the circumcision operation takes place.

The actual operation is performed by four elders, the *kukopmelkom* (circumcisers). The operation is elaborate – the initiate sits down and wood ash placed under him. The foreskin is stretched out to its fullest capacity and pegged down to the ground with wooden pegs. He is left in this position for about half an hour when several incisions are made length-wise. These have the effect of producing a number of thin and eventually withered strips of skin. The initiates are then released to a hut which has been specially built for this occasion where they remain for ten days. In this period the foreskin is anointed with leopard fat, seared with a red-hot piece of iron wire. While the iron is on the skin, cold water is poured on. The net result is that the lacerated foreskin falls off from the line formed by the searing iron. The initiates then spend three months in this hut living on a diet of milk. The initiates are not allowed to take beer or water this period. No women are permitted to either witness the ceremony or meet the initiates in the three

months. Initiates' mothers bring the milk to a point out of sight of the hut and the milk is fetched from there. The three month rest is completed when the elders meet and make an offering of one he-goat provided by the father of one of the initiates. But if one father has two sons circumcised, he provides a bull instead. A feast is held outside the hut.

Two days after the feast, the newly circumcised youths and all their friends of both sexes hold a dance at a *manyatta* selected by the elders. The head of the *manyatta* hosting the dance slaughters a bull and all join in the ensuing feast. The slaughter of a bull signifies that the circumcision ceremony is key to a new generation of people to defend cattle. A bull is only slaughtered for the most important functions in this community. The newly circumcised then go to the river, bathe, join hands, and jump at a stretch for several hours watched by elders, mothers and friends. In the course of the jumping, a mother starts the *ngoma* proper by turning to the elders and singing a dialogic song that involves one of the elders,

Mother : *where are our sons whom you have hidden for three months?*
 (the senior elder takes up the song and responds)

Senior elder: *If you are anxious to see your sons*
 Who are now men

You must jump over this stick to get to them

A stick is then held by two elders about 3 feet above the ground and then mothers try their prowess at jumping. Once one of them succeeds jumping over, a general rush of mothers is made to the sons, each mother rubs the body of her son with ghee

After the end of ghee rubbing, the sons withdraw and are addressed by the senior elder who informs them that they are now men and must behave as such. The elders then decide at once whether everyone of the oldest ageset "*rika*" is dead before the initiates are named after that "*rika*". East Pokot circumcision age sets from which new initiates get names are: Korongoro, Kipkoimet, Kablalaach, Mukutwa, Nyongi, Maina and Chumwa. In this period, the elders inculcate into the initiates who an East Pokot is, what he is known for and all they should do to protect cattle at all costs. They are taken through their creation myth in relation to cattle in order to understand the place of cattle in their history.

b) Religious Organization of the East Pokot

Commissioners Seton and Hosking (1950) (quoted in Republic of Kenya 1950) presented the religion of the East Pokot in a fairly pessimistic way. Accordingly, the religion of the East Pokot is vague and it is difficult to find two people whose ideas on the subject are quite the same even as they all agree on the existence of a supreme being – *Tororot* (the Sky), who made the earth and causes the birth of mankind and of animals. The supreme being's younger brother – *Asis* (the Sun), his wife *Seta* (the

Pleiades), and his eldest son *Ilat* (Rain), eldest daughter *Topogh* (the Evening star) and *Kokel* (the Stars) are his other children. Accordingly, all of them are gods and are benevolently disposed towards mankind. *Tororot* may be approached through cattle sacrifices only. The spirits of the departed are the medium between man and God. A man's spirit at death goes into a snake which it uses as a means of traveling. The dead require food, and when a snake enters a hut it must not be killed but instead given an offering or serving of milk, meat and tobacco. Snakes may however be killed outside, but if killed and at the time of its killing it is occupied by the spirit of a dead man, his spirit also dies.

A missionary attached to Barpello Catholic Mission in Kerio Valley said of the East Pokot in relation to religion:

I have been working among pastoralists for three years. It is in this place that I appreciated with more gratitude for God, the precious gift of water, traditional ceremonies, nature and concern for ecology. Indeed the East Pokot have taught me to welcome and admire the gift of life in totality. I have been touched by their closeness to God whom they call *Tororot*, great care of life, closeness with nature, the desire to live in peace, respect for elders, use of traditional medicine, collaboration with missionaries, among others (Mwaniki, 2006) .

Thus, unlike the colonial and therefore dismissive opinion of East Pokot religion, present day missionaries have a more respectable and balanced view of religion as infused into the environment.

By nature the East Pokot are very close to God who they invoke in all their daily meetings. Every meeting begins and ends with prayer to God. They perform several rituals in their many traditional ceremonies such as during initiation to manhood, childbirth, sickness and during socio-political gatherings. Therefore God is at the centre of their lives. They value the birth of any child and the more children one has the more blessed they are. As such many mothers take care of their neighbours' children as long as those children are East Pokot. They place *Tororot* so high that only a cow can be sacrificed to appease him.

c) Other Rites of Passage Among the East Pokot Pastoralists

The Pokot are faithful to their cultural practices. Of particular importance are the rites of passage from birth to death. The transition from one step to another is marked with much celebration, except death. There are six steps in the rites of passage which one must undergo. These are:

- i) *Parpara* – a reconciliation ceremony for safe delivery.
- ii) *Malal* (riwoy) – a naming ceremony for one child or a child born abnormally with feet coming out first or a child conceived before her mother commenced menstruation since the previous birth.

- iii) *Keghot kelat* – the knocking out of teeth for medicinal purpose so that a person not able to bite can swallow.
- iv) *Sorim* – body decoration for beauty.
- v) *Tum* – circumcision or clitoridectomy. This is marked by song and celebration.
- vi) *Kepa rotwo* – going to face the knife or mutat – the cut.
- vii) *Kensyo* – rite of passage to marriage.
- viii) *Sapana* – the crowning of men as elders followed by a clay headdress.
- ix) *Meghat* – rite of passage for the deceased meant to cleanse him/her and those who are left behind. This is done so that his/her evil spirit (*onyot*) does not torment the living.

These are elaborate rituals that span the entire lifespan of a person and constitute what Zuesse (1979) calls a ritual cosmos. Ideally the rituals enable individuals to realize their full potential and maintain a balance between the natural and supernatural forces. They also play a transitional role, bestow new responsibilities initiates/individuals besides playing an integrational role into the community. Hence failure to undergo these rites of passage automatically excludes one from the day to day activities of his or her age mates. Such a person essentially remains an outsider to the community. It is inconceivable for a Pokot, irrespective of the social status, to fail to fulfill each of them. The most important ritual of *sapana*, which marks entry into adulthood and symbolised by wearing a clay headdress, is accompanied by slaughter of many cattle to symbolize its importance to the East Pokot people.

d) *The East Pokot Relationship With their Natural Environment*

East Pokot peoples' proximity to nature is strongly implied in all their activities. For instance the ritual system demonstrates that they follow the natural pattern – seasons, day or night, dry or rainy seasons. Certain rituals are only performed at night – *Amat, Amoros, Mis, Muma, Muntin, Poghisyo, Putyon and Tiso*, while others are performed during the day - *Munyan, Lapai, Kikatat, Sapana, Karera and Karata Pogh*. However the rituals can also be classified into three other sub groups, namely: transitory (*Parapara, Kiporcha Asis, Malal/Riwoy, Keghot Kelat, Sorim, Tum/Rotwo, Kensyo Sapana, Meghat*), reconciliatory (*Kikatat, Karata Pogh, Poghisyo, Amat, Muma, Mis, Mutat, Laapay*) and appeasing (*Tiso, Moy, Kilokat, Karera, Oy, Amoros, Putyon, Munyan Muntin*). The night rituals are carried out for the moon and stars to witness while those that seek assurance are done in day for the sun to witness.

In the next section of this article, I focus on the gender dynamics as they relate to cattle among the East Pokot.

1.4 Gender Based Socialization and Cattle Among the East Pokot

The Pokot are a patrilineal society, hence from the perspective of an outsider the woman is regarded lower than a man in the social hierarchy. For the Pokot it is an arrangement of different people being allocated different tasks for the good of society. Women are considered to be children and a closer view of the position of women among the Pokot is captured in this saying:

kaikai kuWeste chi nko tany kitil nko korka (better walk with a cow than with a woman).

The implication is that one is materially rich walking with a cow relative to walking with a woman.. This also implies that cows are more important than women, besides cementing the great attachment to cattle among them. Women are also considered among a man's property. Hence, a Pokot man walks around his cattle, children and wives.

Quoting Ndegwa (2006), one will be richer materially through walking with a cow which he has bought, is going to sell or has raided – leading to increase in personal wealth hence a cow is more preferable to women. In the context of serious punishment where an East Pokot (*Pochon*) man kills a fellow East Pokot man (*pochon*) the most dreaded fine of *lapai* is paid. It consists of payment of 60 cows. For women *lapai* attracts 30 cows.

Lapai is the most dreaded punishment in East Pokot for the most heinous crime of murder. It involves all clan members of the murderer who contribute to this collective punishment. Sometimes the clan of the deceased will forcefully confiscate cattle from the clan of the murderer in case of any minimal delay or resistance. The *kokwo* (the traditional council of elders) enforces the payment. The current average market price for a mature indigenous cow in East Pokot is Kshs. 30,000 (USD 345). A *lapai* penalty therefore translates to about Kshs. 1,800,000 (USD 21,000) for a man and Kshs. 900,000 (USD 10,500) for a woman. This shows that those who commit murder against fellow East Pokot lose or are deprived of their most precious commodity- cattle.

Cows are rarely slaughtered for meat except on key occasions during *sapana* ceremony (wearing of the headdress). Among the East Pokot, women may manage goats or sheep but cattle is always under men. Schneider (1956), in his analysis of Pokot aesthetics, defined meaning and use of the Pokot word *pachigh* which according to Coote (1981) is variously interpreted as beautiful, pretty or pleasant. The Pokot word *karam* means good. The Pokot use the word *pachigh* to aesthetically pleasing objects of the natural world. However, cattle are defined as *karam* (good) but the colours of their skin are *pachigh*. Coote (1981) further avers that to Nilotic speakers, cattle are the most highly valued possessions hence nilotic aesthetic is centred on cattle.

However, the Pokot woman is also regarded as the pillar of her family and community. Besides household tasks, she also constructs the *manyatta*. She has her own small herd of cows that enables her provide food for the family. Before having sex with her husband for the first time she must be given a cow (*chesarur*) over which she has total control. This shows sexual intercourse is big business hence to access it you must commit big business – cattle. Traditionally, women are the medicine people or healers (*chepsakitian*). Mothers are the first to be informed in case of a sickness in the family since husbands are most of the time away from home tending cattle. However, currently, following the collapse of the traditional economy, schooling and increased/prolonged drought, the medical role is now increasingly the responsibility of men who have to provide money for a sick family member to be taken to hospital.

In the context of marriage for the East Pokot cattle is currency for paying bridewealth. Hence the strong bond between women and cattle is made. A man without cattle is poor hence no woman will accept him for a husband, and no father will accept his daughter to be married “free” to a man who owns nothing. Put another way, no man will dare approach a lady for marriage if he has no cattle to pay bridewealth with. And since age mates marry almost the same time, each will ensure he gets cattle for this worthy cause. A Pokot man is allowed to marry more than one wife as long as he has cattle to pay bridewealth.

Hence, gender dynamics in the East Pokot community are also embedded in the wider dynamics entailing cattle. The social, economic and cultural processes in the community are closely tied to cattle as a potentially economic commodity to a community who view it more as a cultural normative symbol. In other words, the moral economy of the East Pokot outweighs its political variant, and depends almost entirely on cattle. This is why to the East Pokot , the logic of cattle keeping transcends the usual economic or material concerns to situate itself in the mythical, cultural paradigms that frame the meanings of being Pokot. It is this unique view of cattle among the East Pokot that invites a closer look at cattle and culture of the people, as I do below.

1.5 The Centrality of Cattle in the Culture of the East Pokot Pastoralists

To the East Pokot people, a cow (*tany or tich* in plural) carries all that they need to survive – milk, blood, meat, horns used as drinking cups, payment of bride wealth, pay fines, hides and also given as presents. Hence once’s wealth is measured in terms of numbers of cows that they own. Cattle is everything for livelihood and existence, for even day to day experiences are expressed in the context of cattle. For a Pokot *tany* is everything because it features prominently in *sapana* ritual, sex, circumcision, milk, moranism,

war, religion, rain and pride. Because of these roles associated with cattle, the East Pokot resist any initiative that may be seen as threatening their ownership of cattle in numbers. For instance, when the colonial government attempted to introduce an abattoir at Marigat to encourage the East Pokot to sell “excessive” cattle, the East Pokot were too worried of the possibility of losing them. When the abattoir project failed, they were so happy that they composed a song in praise of the then political representative for Rift Valley Province who had initially opposed this project. The “*Kongoi Legco*” (Thanks Legco) song was popular in the 1950s-1960s, until after independence.

Pokot: Owe x2

*Owe chorewenyutany
Kongoi Legco nya kicham
Kwaketa tany
Were kimoi-ee*

English: Welcome x2

Welcome my friend cow
Thanks to Legco which has agreed that the cattle will continue to graze
Welcome Moi x2

Many proverbs and sayings use a cow as symbol of learning and the most important element in their existence. For example, “*anyin tany aki ngwan*” – a cow is sweet and sour, is intended as a lesson that everything has its good and bad side, and is often used to warn people over irrational behaviour, uncontrollable celebration towards success or total pessimism over failure.

“*Anyin la chepo roryon*” as sweet as the milk of a cow that has just calved” is another proverb used in reference to something that has brought many blessings to a person or family. Visser (1983), aptly captures the value of cattle to the East Pokot as follows:

their life centres around the cattle. The ideal of every East Pokot is to keep cattle. A man without cattle is looked upon as dead. Cattle are in the first place a means of subsistence. Blood is taken from them every month, cows are milked, the male give meat. The Pokot make clothes, blankets and shoes from the skins. The cattle play a role in social relations, especially marriage which is not only a union of individuals but also families. They also have a great ritual value, for one needs the skin or chime for rituals or ceremonies. At a certain age every boy is given a bullock - a prize bullock about which he composes songs and after which he is named; one is known by his bullock name, which is shouted in war when one is spearing the enemy. Cattle are the objects of raids on the neighbouring tribes.

They are a form of legal tender and considered a mobile bank. They give a man prestige and wealth. They give him meat and clothes. They are the means for blessing and purification.

From the lengthy quotation above we see that the East Pokot have intense interest in cattle. A cow is a sacred. To them cattle is the most dominant, basic commodity to their subsistence and used as a measure of wealth. Cattle is a medium of exchange, an object of emotional interest and symbolic elaboration. Cattle is part of the self, the lens through which social life is perceived. Their ultimate gift to God is the cow and God's ultimate gift to them is the cow. They have a more or less religious involvement to cattle, but not economic motivation, hence they prefer to and do accumulate cattle not to sell them, but for multiplication. Therefore their involvement with cattle is less economic, but more culturally complex. Hence it is more logical for the East Pokot to build up a large herd of cattle as a fall back against drought, cattle rustlers, and disease and as a reserve of social capital to reclaim their identity back. Therefore those who carelessly sell, (and they do not easily do so) withdraw or squander the cattle by slaughtering them are wasteful; rather they utilize the milk which is like consuming profit. In this context, the East Pokot view of cattle is akin to the protestants view of capital for investment and reinvestment as expressed in Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* 1904-1905 (Giddens, 1996). Cattle keeping is performed as a full time vocation but not for part-time devotion. A discussion with one fairly elitist East Pokot businessman and teacher (Mr Henry Losikiriatum of Churo area) helped me to aptly capture the people's concern for cattle in the following anecdote:

you know our people (*pochon*) are interesting. I sold my thirteen bulls in order to raise money to pay fees for my son at university. I had no other source of money that time. But my cousin whom I was sending to sell the bulls for me thought I had a very serious problem which I was not sharing with them. He wondered why I was selling so many cattle. He went on to inform my three agemates and one morning they came to my house to find out the problem I had since I was selling too many cows. Then I shared with them the motive for selling the cows. They were not convinced that I would sell those many cows just to pay fees. You know that was the only reason for which I sold the bulls. After that I still remained with about 120 cattle in my herd, but not to mention the goats, sheep and donkeys I own.

This experience depicts people who see irrationality in selling cattle and the concerns of his brother and agemates reflect the accurate picture of the East Pokot in relation to cattle.

Hence, a Pokot child from early childhood is socialized into respect for a cow, including not abandoning it even if it leads to their own death.

They believe that all cattle belong to them hence, cattle rustling is justified because they are simply going to bring home what is naturally their own. It was also reported in the colonial period that the Pokot accepted vaccination campaigns for their cattle more heartily than human health and education initiatives. In 2009 a Christian church began construction of a church building in Kongor area next to a permanent water spring where cattle are watered during the dry season. The local people did not support it as it was believed a church building in the vicinity of water for livestock would expose them and make their cattle more vulnerable. When the church was about to be completed it was demolished by unknown people one night. So for the East Pokot they will do anything in order to keep their cattle safe. Therefore Herskovits (1926) cattle complex coinage indeed aptly described the East Pokot's intensity of values attached to cattle. Pritchard (1940) in his celebrated study of the Nuer, cited the the Nuer as saying that it is cattle that destroy people, for more people have died for the sake of a cow than any other cause.

Relatedly, McCabe (2007) aptly captured the Turkana obsession with cattle in "*Cattle bring us to our enemies*" which equally applies to the Pokot as well. However, for the East Pokot, the more accurate expression would be "*cattle take us to our enemies*". To the East Pokot, if a person has no cattle, they have no business with him. East Pokot boys have particular interest in cattle. A boy may be allocated a young bull (*kiruk*) to tender and take care of until maturity. The bull becomes a symbol of his prowess. He gives it a great name like *Amin, Osama or Mbuni*; composes songs in its praise and he becomes an object of girls admiration. Sometimes the boys become arrogant or indisciplined for they have the biggest bull around. Usually when deviant behavior becomes excessive such a bull is slaughtered casually to "*dehorn the ill-mannered boy*". At marriage time for those who keep them that far, the bull becomes the first to be counted for bride wealth for the young man's wife.

Herskovits (1926), quoted by Coote, (1981) in reference to Pokot cattle, shows that they are kept for subsistence. He summarizes Pokot love for cattle as,

The attachment of herdsmen to their cattle is expressed in a variety of ways: by taking a favourite name for oneself; by affection for and identification with cattle; by insistence on certain sex taboos over the management of stock; and by involvement of stock in ceremonies of rites of passage – birth, circumcision, marriage, death. Pokot enjoy cattle: they like to look at them, smell them, touch them.

Raiding for cattle is a key object in pastoralists raids. Traditionally, pastoralists have raided their neighbouring pastoral communities for

restocking, especially after drought or disease or when the *moran* have to obtain cattle to pay bride wealth in preparation for marriage.

Schilling *et al* (2012) report that while the Turkana confirmed hunger and drought as the most important factors explaining cattle rustling, the East Pokot girl, Miss Chepkoronto Losililee (*apseudo name*) captures this picture:

I am 15 years old, a 3rd born in our family of seven. I did not go to school. I am employed by a fellow Pokot to work in this hotel. I have been in employment for three months now. Our home was in Kapau (in Akoret area). My father was killed in 2006 during a Turkana raid in which we lost all our livestock, so we came to our uncle in Chemsik, that is where I was introduced to this person who was in need of a person to work in his hotel. The problem with this work is men who keep coming, they have many questions and many of them not even know Pokot language. This job is not good because you stand most of the time, there are too many people always looking at me. After some time I will go back home so that my uncle can buy us some cattle.

The story of Miss Chepkoronto Losililee depicts the plight of many East Pokot dispossessed of cattle. They find themselves wandering in the wilderness as it were, yet in spite of that their hope is one day to own cattle and become the real East Pokot that they were before. In spite of her obtaining a wage, Ms Losililee understands it as servitude, an attribute the East Pokot do not cherish. Ownership of cattle is the thing to strive for.

Existing literature appears to suggest that the East Pokot raid for cattle for commercial purposes as well (Kaimba, *et. al.* 2011; Eaton, 2010). However, interviews with the East Pokot suggest otherwise. To them the motive for raids is cattle accumulation, not desire for money. In their view those engaged in commercial livestock activities are not East Pokot. Most of them are Tugen, Burji, Somali and Kikuyu who sell the livestock in Nakuru, Eldoret, Nairobi and Athi River (Mutsotso, 2010).

Going for cattle belonging to other cultural groups (*ket walak*) is based on the East Pokot belief that all cattle in the world are theirs. Hence raids for cattle are justified and embedded in every aspect of their culture. Raiders are blessed by the seers (*werkoyan*) before they embark on the event. It is sanctioned by the highest office in their order. Cattle is looked at as the main factor that will improve or worsen their life, hence whatever involves bringing in more cattle, whether legal or moral or not, is justified in the world view of the East Pokot.

The elaborate preparations the cattle raiders go through before executing the mission and the support their mothers give them also reflects the seriousness of cattle to the East Pokot. Focused group discussions with elders across East Pokot concurred that this was the process:

the moran go into seclusion for about fourteen days. They practice and ensure each of them has the most effective weapon. At the end of the fourteen days they visit the manyatta of the seer (*werkoyon*). The *werkoyon* slaughters a black he-goat and checks through the offals to interpret what they potend for. If the *werkoyon* finds the offals are ok he sanctions the cattle raid, if not he calls it off. If he sanctions it, he directs them on how and where to follow and kinds of things they will come across. Each moran is smeared with red soil and a wrist tied with a lace from the goat skin as a sign of good luck. Mothers of the moran are also tied with the goat skin lace till the time their sons come back from the raid. The raiders are under strict instructions to follow the *werkoyon's* advice in order to ensure safety.

A successful raid brings fame and prestige to the raiders for now they will be wealthy in terms of cattle, and for the unmarried they will become instant attractions from unmarried girls. Sr Mwaniki (2006) an Incarnate Word Sister working for the Barpello Catholic Parish in East Pokot said, "these people have great attachment to animals such as cows and they continue to keep many indigenous livestock".

Ford (1971) quoted by Dietz (1987) indicates the East African pastoralists in the 1890's as having witnessed a great livestock loss in East Africa. The East Pokot were not excepted following a rinderpest (*lopit*) epidemic that killed about 90% of cattle in Pokot generally and Karamojong. It had devastating results for East Pokot pastoralism. People were forced to look to other survival strategies but for the East Pokot, given their ever-present interest in cattle, began to rebuild their cattle herds to alarming levels that were ecologically unsustainable (Dietz, 1987). Maher (1937) was so concerned with the excessive cattle in East Pokot, a constricted territory that had been badly overgrazed. This prompted him to refer to East Pokot region as the agricultural slums of Kenya.

1.6 Conclusion

As observed the East Pokot from the time they abandoned agriculture and moved down from the hills to the drier lowlands they never looked back on taking after cattle keeping. They maintained one motive- cattle accumulation at all costs. Cattle is enshrined in all aspects of their life. It is cattle more than anything else that makes one an enemy of the East Pokot. To this day they remain the leading owners of cattle compared to other East African pastoralists in spite of the relatively small territory they occupy.

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