

Contested Drylands: Political Hegemony, Appropriation of Land, Economic Resources, and Emerging Conflicts in the Devolved Units of Northern Kenya

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Northern Kenya has a long history of violent conflicts stretching to the 1800s between pastoral groups occupying these arid and semi-arid landscapes. Explanations of conflicts have historically circled around the need to recoup livestock losses after droughts or epidemics (Turton, 1970¹; Dahl, 1979²), the control and expansion of resource bases (Spencer, 1973³; Schlee, 1989⁴; Spear and Waller, 1993⁵), Homer-Dixon's environmental scarcity ideas (Mohamed, 2018⁶), the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (Mkutu, 2007⁷; Gumba and Turi, 2019⁸), boundary re-making (Greiner, 2013⁹), elite politics (Okumu et al., 2017¹⁰), and historical marginalization (Elfverson, 2019¹¹). Some of these explanations have also come under sharp criticism, for instance, the environmental scarcity theory (see Adano, Witsenburg, and Dietz, 2009¹²).

In the last decade, however, and particularly following the promulgation of Kenya's constitution in 2010, new dynamics of natural and economic resource-based conflicts have

¹ E. Turton, *The pastoral tribes of northern Kenya 1800 – 1916* (PhD Thesis, University of London, 1970) 97-98.

² G. Dahl, *Suffering Grass: Subsistence and Society of Waso Borana*, (Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, 1979)

³ P. Spencer, *Nomads in Alliance: Symbiosis and Growth Among the Rendille and Samburu of Kenya* (Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁴ G. Schlee, *Identities on the Move: Clanship and Pastoralism in Northern Kenya* (Manchester University Press, 1989) 1-5

⁵ T. Spear and R. Waller (eds.), *Being Maasai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa* (James Currey, 1993)

⁶ B. Mohamed, *An Analysis of local perceptions of the role of drought in exacerbating contemporary pastoral conflicts in Northern Kenya: a case study of Marsabit County*, MA Thesis, University of Cape town (2018).

⁷ K. A. Mkutu, *Guns and governance in the Rift Valley* (Boydell and Brewer, 2007).

⁸ D. Gumba and C. Turi, *Cross border arms trafficking inflames northern Kenya's conflict*, ISS Today (2019).

⁹ C. Greiner, *Guns, land, and votes: Cattle rustling and the politics of boundary (re)making in Northern Kenya*, *African Affairs*, Volume 112, Issue 447, April 2013, Pages 216–237

¹⁰ W. Okumu, K. Bukari, S. Papa and E. Onyiego, *The role of elite rivalry and ethnic politics in livestock raids in Northern Kenya*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2017, 55(03):479-509.

¹¹ E. Elfverson, *Patterns and Drivers of Communal Conflict in Kenya*, In Ratuva Steven (ed), *The Palgrave, Handbook of Ethnicity*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

¹² W.R. Adano, K. Witsenburg, and A.J. Dietz. *Scarcity of natural resources and pastoral conflicts in northern Kenya: an inquiry* (2009).

emerged in the region. The constitution gave rise to political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization, referring to power sharing between national and subnational levels as well as transfer of functions and responsibility for expenditure and revenues to subnational levels (see Lago, 2021¹³), thereby making Counties the key focus areas for the country's future concerning development. Rather than entrenching maturity of democracy, governance, and inclusion, the subnational units (Counties) immediately became the centres of political hegemony reflected in ethnic mobilization and resource (land and revenue) appropriation. Planned mega infrastructures like the Lamu Port and Lamu-Southern Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET Corridor) whose components include planned resort cities, ports, pipelines, roads, and railways cutting across much of the northern Kenya landscape, exacerbate the situation. Towns that initially functioned as the centres of trade evolved rather rapidly into County administrative units and became the nodes of power and resource control and appropriation in the devolved units.

The implications of these dynamics are ethnic and clan-based competition over political power and representation giving rise to scramble for land, elite control of economic spaces and entire towns, dissolution, and privatization of chunks of formerly communal conservancy land, and skewed resource allocation to some at the detriment of others. This paper explores the nature and structure of political hegemony and ethnic/clan-based appropriation and control of resources and power in Marsabit and Isiolo Counties in northern Kenya with a specific focus on Marsabit and Isiolo towns, the County administrative units and the fringes of these towns as well as areas of planned infrastructural developments. We pay keen attention to emerging conflicts and associated violent attacks that take the forms of ethnic depopulation through killings, ethnic land-based conflicts, state- and elite appropriation, grabbing of economically potential landmasses in the Counties, and the systematic erosion of indigenous land governance systems in favour of "politically appropriate" ones.

Violence has increasingly become a popular instrument and means to achieve these ends. In Marsabit, for instance, the Borana and Garre ethnic groups compete over control of political

¹³ I. Lago, Handbook on Decentralization, Devolution and the State, Elgar Handbooks in Political Science (2021).

power,¹⁴ urban business and spaces, as well as trade in general with support from business and political elites. In Isiolo, similar struggles exist between the Borana, Somali, Turkana, and Samburu groups associated with the control of Isiolo town and its environs, dissolution and privatization of sections of communal conservancies through ethnic elites¹⁵, and appropriation of areas earmarked for mega infrastructure developments. In the mist of these conflicts and struggles over control and political representation is skewed allocation of space, administrative positions, and public utilities such as water. Control over trading spaces and towns is largely connected to trade in contraband such as illicit guns and ammunition and cannabis but also the dominance of specific ethnic figures in the main sectors of the town's economies such as transport and other industries.

The paper is the result of an ethnographic study conducted on conflict dynamics in Marsabit and Isiolo Counties in Northern Kenya between April and July 2022. It involved interviews with community members, chiefs, NGO workers, religious leaders, local police officers, women leaders, and County Government Officials in Marsabit and Isiolo Counties.

¹⁴ See Malicha Salad (2021) The Silent Undertones of Unending Conflict in Marsabit, The Elephant, 29th October <https://www.theelephant.info/op-eds/2021/10/29/the-silent-undertones-of-unending-conflict-in-marsabit/>

¹⁵ See Sharamo Roba D. (2014) Politics of Pastoral Violence: A case study of Isiolo County, Northern Kenya, Future Agricultures, Working Paper, 095, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a089c4ed915d3cfd000408/FAC_Working_Paper_095.pdf