

Histories of natural resource scarcity, raiding, and range management in north-western Kenya

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National and international media often portray northern Kenya as a place of drought, ethnic tension, natural resource scarcity, insecurity, and violent cattle raiding. Newspaper images from Turkana County often include desert-like landscapes, emaciated livestock, and young men wielding AK47s. While a causal link between drought, resource scarcity, and violence in northern Kenya is evoked in popular discourse, the connection and the historical entanglement of these phenomena have not been fully explored, and their shifting nature is often little known or misunderstood. This article partly addresses this by tracking rainfall patterns, drought situations, range management practices, livelihood strategies, violence and livestock raiding in Turkana County from the colonial occupation in 1918 to the present. In addition, I will analyse the shifting nature of raiding and how the local population adapted to its evolution, as well as its consequences on local production strategies and ecosystems.

The article shows how and why raiding from the early decades of the 20th century transformed to increasingly being a response to natural resource scarcity, grazing, and water, and how this transformation culminated in the early to mid-1980s, and why this picture was increasingly blurred in the 1990s and after. The following is a summary of the development of raiding in relation to natural resources, including some of the major trends and arguments, which will be expanded in the article.

When the Turkana communities were violently subdued and de-armed by British punitive patrols in the 1910s, they not only lost much of their fighting capacity, but their livestock economy was also ruined, firstly by massive livestock confiscations and secondly by a severe restriction of their mobility. I argue that this, together with other developments during the colonial era, altered the institution of raiding for decades to come.

As the Turkana livestock economy was recovering from colonial conquest, raiding became an effective tool for communities to re-establish herds and secure access to critical natural resources. In the following decades, a clear pattern emerges in which major drought events are followed by waves of raiding and violence, as communities struggle for natural resources and attempt to

replenish their herds. Colonial administration in Turkana also led to considerable internal displacement. This challenged established access rights to grazing and water. Often communities were able to negotiate peaceful access to these resources, however in border areas between ethnic groups conflicts often arose.

Colonial administration also lay the basis for new living patterns in Turkana, sedentarisation increases and small urban centres are established during late colonialism. During the 1970s and 1980s international development projects created new conflicts between established communities with indigenous rights to certain natural resources and development organizations and their irrigation workers.

During the 1980s the institution of livestock raiding entered a long process of disentanglement from natural resource scarcity experienced by the individual producer and communities. Instead, outside economic and political factors increasingly drive raiding activities. The markets for labour, small arms, and livestock grow in the 1980s, creating new actors and incentives, which alter the institution of raiding and challenge generational hierarchies. In a rapidly transforming economy, elder stock owners and younger warriors have increasingly opposing interests, which often lead to contestations and increased violence. Simultaneously many indigenous conflict management systems are transformed by new resources and actors such as NGOs, civil society organizations, and various state actors.

These changes are on full display in the 1990s when Turkana experienced unprecedented violence and ethnic tension. Albeit the early years of the 1990s are drought years the violence of the 1990s is not readily explained by the same ecological factors which are prominent in the previous decades. These tendencies are continued in the new millennium, with the insecurity landscape getting increasingly blurry. Including a re-emergence of natural resource scarcity as a driver for conflict. The generational tensions mounting since the 1980s culminated in a partial breakdown of indigenous means of conflict control in the early 2000s, which again diversifies violence and raiding in Turkana.

In addition, the article shows how local adaptations to insecurity ultimately fuel natural resource scarcity and ecological degradation. This happens in part because violence forces herders to alter

migration patterns, establish larger herding associations, and restrict grazing in areas deemed insecure.

This is a historical investigation of climate cycles, natural resource management, violence, and local adaptations, and is primarily based on archival material from local archives in Lodwar and the National Archives in Nairobi, as well as oral history interviews from Turkana.