We came upon Antony Angiros’ Tepeth family north of Moroto town, near Nakiloro. Nakiloro nestles in the lush green and thickly wooded base of the mountain. The village in northern Uganda is home to a military detachment, a police station, and what from a distance appears to be some sort of missionary outpost but is actually the camp of a Chinese mining firm. As with Moroto town itself, and the missionary complex in Kotido where I stayed, it’s the locals who look out of place. This is due to the intrusion of transformative foreignness and I already sense the beginning of future conflict.

The faces of Antony Angiros’ party detain us. I already feel the excitement of something different in Nakiloro, just by looking at them. Simon Omeri, my guide and interpreter, makes enquiries and tells me that they came down the mountain to report a raid.

A raid. The excitement I feel is not proper. But in a macabre way, I have wanted to feel and see a raid. I try to tell myself that excitement is a neutral reaction. Right now, I see in their faces what it must not
UPON MT. MOROTO: AFTERMATH OF A RAID

107

only look but also, feel like. The kneaded-down faces you will see at funerals; the funerary air. Their grief stabs instantly. I see this aftermath and try to forget I wanted to witness a raid. Still I want to go up the mountain.

The exhausted party sits in the shade of a tree. They have been walking in their tire-sandals and gumboots since early morning. Capes studded with forget-me-nots tell they have been walking the wild.

“A group of Turkana entered their village last night and carried away 11 goats.”

A theft then, not a raid. The culprits ghosted in under the cover of darkness. Still, it is a serious matter and calling it a raid when making a police statement raises the stakes. But nothing seems to be happening. Antony Angiros, alone among the men dressed in shorts and shirts of marching cuts, with sneakers and socks, is not too interested in our presence. He utters one-line responses. There are more important things to pay attention to. He’s the patriarch. In his mid-40s, he is husband to four wives, father of 15 children. He looks in the direction of the missionary-like establishment. He walks away.

“How did they know it was the Turkana?” I ask.

“They tracked them to the Kenyan border,” a woman who seems one of the party, yet not of the party due to her lack of traditional Karamojong attire, says. “In Orum.”

I look up into the mountain. Too dense, too much forest.

The police have promised to write to their Kenyan counterparts. This is not what the Angiros family wants to hear.

“It is too hard for us to go and talk to the Turkana,” Angiros’ 18-year old son, Lomogin Charakan, says, deadpanning. “Perhaps if high-ranking people talk to the Turkana...”

Simon Omeri explains that since the Karamojong no longer have guns, the Turkana can walk in and out as they wish. It is a mournful, tortured afternoon. Losing eleven goats from a family of some 30 people, counting Angiros’ grandchildren, hurts. They accuse the Kenyan government of arming Kenyan pastoralist and the Ugandan government of disarming Ugandan pastoralists. “Their lives depend on livestock,” Simon Omeri explains. “If they want to buy something, they sell livestock.”

How to solve the matter then? Peace dialogue, Simon Omeri says. “Joint kraals for protection, open trade, meeting with Kenyan authorities.”

“Let them remove the boundaries so we can go in,” Antony Angiros, who has returned with a not-very
encouraging face, says. “The Kenyans can come in. We can’t go into Kenya.”

The big, peace-building plans, on an afternoon like this, seem too unwieldy. Angiros slumps down in the shed. He looks defeated. I begin to suspect the 11 goats are gone for good. “We will wait and watch,” he says with finality.

My excitement mounts. I want to see the scene of the raid. Angiros sees an opportunity. It is a long way up to the mountain dwelling. His youngest wife is 22 and with a two month-old baby. Other members of his party are exhausted. They walked up to the Kenyan border. We can see the homestead if we take his family. But he stays behind to follow up the reported theft.

The drive up the mountain is slow. Rock-strewn passes skirt the rim of sheer ravines. Hardy roots cut across passages. Dappled shadows, thin mountain air, and the dropping temperature compensate for the climb.

After climbing for half an hour, we are high up in Kakingol. The yellow of sunflowers, the hump of huts, a primary school, a dispensary, are suddenly visible up here where it is all silence. We leave the car at the dispensary. The rest of the journey to the village is on goat tracks.

The sunflowers reflect how brilliant the sun shines here, their yellow petals almost shimmering from being so sun-lit, translucent like lampshades. Everything from mud-walls, blue sky, khaki and burgundy clothing, brown earth, down to my pencil and notebook all catch the sun. I have never seen sorghum growing so vigorously it seems to be in rapturous joy at being alive.

The goat tracks narrow as we ascend. We are walking in single file now. At the head, someone stops. We all stop. I am called to the fore. The lead young man points to the ground.

“You see this footprint,” Simon Omeri translates. “It was made by a young man.”

I nod, pretending to have seen footprints. I only see earth and twigs. “How can you tell the age?”

“You can tell the weight, the height, and if the person was carrying something.”

They think the raiders were young men, the average height around 5’8”. Young men walk on their toes, I am told. The older a person gets, the more their weight transfers to their heels. Old men walk on their heels. A tall person will have longer feet.

Someone carrying a load will leave deep heels and deep toes stumped on the ground.

All easy to read – if you can see the footmarks in the first place.
We are going higher now. Ranges soar up all around us. Blank-faced rock cliffs stare down at us. My attention is riveted on a sheer rock face, slippery and without handholds, rising high above us. It is called Awoyeses. Across the valley, another raised peak like Aweless’ competes for supremacy. This one is called Kasogoliese I am told.

It is very silent up here in the mountains. The crunch of our footsteps on loose, gravelly pebbles re-enacts the raiders’ dark passage last night. They would have had to be careful, for they would have had nowhere else to walk but here. Mountains give few options. This is properly a pass. We can only walk in file and bent over through the thickly thatched mountain vegetation.

The frenzied reception at Antony Angiros’ homestead echoed the funereal faces of the humans we encountered below the mountain. But if I were to choose who were bereaved the most by last night’s events, it is not the humans who owned and herded the goats. It is the newly orphaned baby goats. The kids hear the approach of humans, and associating it with the return of their mothers, begin a bleating-frenzy whose unmistakable mourning is like humans at a mortuary. I hang back a little. The Maasai cattle I encountered in Olepolos, an hour’s drive West of Nairobi, on the impossibly beautiful, big-earth escarpment in Kenya had struck me by their intelligence. I was an outsider and when I happened across their grazing paths, they stopped and turned heads at me, expelling air, nostrils flaring, as if trained to beware of foreigners. I saw this too with the cows in Kotido. In northern Uganda we too keep animals, but they are docile, they know their place, which is not with humans. But here, in Mt. Moroto, I experience proximity to animals in a way I will never forget. Pastoralists’ animals, I conclude, are aware of their elevated status to the point of arrogance.

The young goats made a rush at us, nuded at our shins. They expect to be carried up in human arms. They demand an answer. “Where is mum, where is mum?” There is no need to interpret their cries. We have no answers. Something close to acceptance of fate becalms them. Now like their human cohorts, they are lost for options. The goats stand back from us. I approach one and it runs away, like a disappointed child showing how it feels. It is eerie to see that the greatest depth of emotion appeared to come not from the humans, but from the animals. Not mere objects of production, they subsume the deeply rooted mythical connection tying the pastoralist to their animals.

Now I see that I don’t have the metaphysical literacy to properly understand these pastoralists. Initially I had thought, on first hearing
the report of the theft, that eleven goats were not so many to demand two national armies mobilise their forces. I was thinking in numbers; statistics lie.

Humans cried at the sight of these caprine juveniles. What strength they had left over from the tracking seemed to melt. I do not speak Ngakarimojong, but hands to heads, frenzied exchange of words, plain-tive pointing of hands at the young goats can only mean the same thing in any language.

“They will have to look for milk from elsewhere to feed them,” Simon Omeri whispers to me. The homestead would not be easy to find if you are a stranger to pastoralist ways, like me. Like a nest, it huddles in a thick stockade of mountain vegetation and twisted li-ana. The huts are like the granaries we have back in northern Uganda, set on piles a meter off the ground that you climb up to enter. The roof is terraced grass thatch; walls are woven together like baskets. It smells of goat droppings all around. Bar the modern clothing, it could be any century up here.

“They were drunk last night,” Simon Omeri says as we walk back down. The ground is strewn with empty sachets of cheap and nasty liquor. He points to mud and wattle, low-roofed shacks.

“The bar. The Turkana came when they were all drunk.”

Simon Omeri is a changed man. He’s agitated. He’s Tepeth, I can now tell. The tell-tale signs of um-bilical connection to a people in the body language, the manner in which he slumped on the grass with the Angiros family, the possessiveness he had which he did not have in Kodilakeny when we visited the Matheniko, has graduated to fullness in his sharing of their grief.

Yet he continues to answer my questions. He is a professional translator, a “field assistant” for whom there are not enough clients like me seeking information to afford him fulltime employment.

I ask him if the Tepeth are highland Matheniko. The doubts I had when speaking to a young man in Moroto town who told me there are lowland and highland Matheniko is confirmed. Mountain and plain ecosystems are too diverse for a people to absorb simultaneously. Even I can tell that. They are an entirely different people perhaps; the syllables hark back to a separate origin.

Simon Omeri snorts, “The Tepeth are mountain people. They are not Karamojong.”

What about the language? “Many Tepeth are now speaking Ngakarimojong.”

How do the Tepeth say, “Thank you very much?” I ask. I have learnt to say “Alakara noi” - “thank you
very much” in Ngakarimojong. The “noi” I picked up from the residue of my Ateso (Yálama noi noi).

“The Tepeth say Koloka nades,” Simon Omeri tells me. A different people then. Karimojong phonemes would not have the D and the S in such close proximity. Ngakarimojong strikes me as exact, strident even. There is a hint of feeling in “Koloka nades” which is decidedly non-Ateker.

“What is the Tepeth word for leg?”

I know the Karamojong say akeju. “Teg.”

The linguistic spot check appears to support the separate origin hypothesis, as do my guide’s comments.

“The Tepeth are related to the Karenga and Teuso,” Simon Omeri explains. “They are related to the Nakaps of Mount Napak and the Kadamites. They are brothers. The Tepeth travel to Kadam to perform rituals.” Much time would have passed then, or is still passing, from when the Tepeth were Tepeth, or Tepes, speaking their own language (called Soo) to now, when they are spoken of as highland Matheniko. They are marrying themselves into oblivion. Young men climb down for wives. Up climb the Matheniko words; out come Matheniko-babbling children. The Matheniko-isation of the mountain dwellers proceeds in this manner, generation by generation.

The loss of eleven goats to lowlanders underlines this brutal erosion of culture. Only the elders now speak Soo fluently. Coping with the hordes from the lowlands armed with guns and words makes for a viciously busy life.

There are details I almost missed. The young men up here wear pleated skirts, Scotsman-like, not the shorts worn down in the plains. I can imagine what the lowlanders say of that. As we go down the mountain, styles change across ecological zones. Young men coming up the mountain thrust out, forward, masculine, beaded, nylon-vested, caped, their hats are stovepipes rakishly tilted to the side—Dr. Seuss hats. You approach a bend and there emerges a young man, cape billowing, his Cat-in-the-Hat stovepipe precariously tilting in the wind, kilt aflutter, a wrist wrapped in brass, ears bedangling with brass. I am overcome with an unconscious expectation that if I look long enough, that they will cast it all off and confess they are just putting on a show for the outsiders. But they are dead serious, the immensely dignified faces underlining the reality of it.

First the Labwor Hills, then a peace-making clan with the phoneme for “poet” embedded in their name. And now kilts and stovepipe hats and capes. No. It’s not all raids and AK-47s. Karamoja, I have decided, has a sense of style so winningly original. It is an enchant-
ed land. The sense of composure, dutifulness; a people not asking for much other than respect and understanding, for whom the animals are more than a crude factor of economic subsistence. Can you forget it when human beings cry for the pain of orphaned goats? They are also curved-stool fanciers whose faces melt at the sight of first-rate craftsmanship. I bought such a stool in Kotido. It has become my calling card. I more than just meld in. I pull out my stool as I approach. I am instantly accepted.

We zigzag down Mount Moroto on crunchy, serpentine, leaf-shadowed passes. The plains appear over the lip of the mountain, distant, blue, fading towards the horizon beyond.