The Problem with Karamoja

“The problem of Karamoja is poverty,” Simon Omeri explains over lunch in Moroto town. “But there are not any other alternatives to survival,” he continues. “Also getting rigid with culture. There’s poor education. There is a problem. Ok, there is not much raiding now. Ok. It’s not a problem of their own making. Drought. When I say drought, let me say climate, it’s not reliable. Clan divisions and inter-clan divisions. Some solutions can work. They have been trying joint kraals for many years but it can only work if there is enough pasture.”

“If you talk of infrastructure, you can say Karamoja is marginalised. These days where the government considers (for resource allocation) is where there is output, where it can get revenue in taxes. You know, those things. We don’t have investors although they are now beginning to come. Karamoja has never had a full minister. They have now created a ministry of Karamoja, but the minister is not a Karamojong.”

“The issue with cows, the culture says if it’s not a cow, there is no marriage. They say when you educate a girl you will not get anything. The girl will go to the town. They have not seen people being married in urban areas. They are not sure of taking girls to school. They say a girl in

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town is a harlot. There is no reference point for educating girls.”

I mention the woman in the Angiros group, the one wearing the gumboots who spoke English.

“She cannot live in Kakingol now. She went to Nakilororo from Moroto because they are her relatives. For us men who are educated we can marry any woman but educated girls cannot marry uneducated men.”

Simon Omeri twists his face to make the point. “To marry those elders?” he shakes his head at the possibility. “When it comes to family, dressing, feeding. In a rural setting, it’s a woman who feeds the family. Educated women cannot accept that. They say there should be gender-balance. These learned women say those rural men cannot reason. Somehow they are right. He cannot provide all the necessities she needs. She needs proper feeding. She needs rice, the other food varieties. The rural women depend on sorghum and maize. When it comes to dressing, learned ladies, any fashion that comes, they want it. Rural women can be ok only in a skirt and shuka. You have seen those houses out there. You think a lady can go there?”

What about coming from Karamoja, what does it feel like?

“When the colonialists came, they said Karamoja is a zoo. It’s not fair. I feel bad. Maybe some outsiders thought that Karamojong have tails. People who come here talk negatively about what happens in Karamoja, which also scares people from coming here to find out.” Suddenly I am uncomfortable. I have been fighting the illusion that we have left Karamoja. Moroto town feels like Mbale town, further to the south. Against my better inclinations, I become aware that during these past three days I have been wanting to be in a place like Moroto Town, to have buildings with concrete and glass, to be in a restaurant with a menu. I do not like the food. I am losing weight fast. I thought I hated city billboards until I saw those in Moroto Town and felt safe again. I listen painfully to Simon Omeri.

“I have travelled to Mbale, Lira, Gulu, Soroti, Kampala, Jinja, Tororo. What I first saw were the roads. The roads are tarmac. You think ‘this is another world’. Karamoja is not Uganda: business was booming. You find a variety of all things, vehicles, and transport is cheap compared to here. People are moving almost 24 hours a day.”

“As an educated Karamojong, people don’t believe you. First of all, they look at you. They take time to believe you are from Karamoja. People who are learned are not treated as Karamojong unless they hear me talking to a fellow Karamojong in Ngakarimojong. People still think we have tails.”