Kaabong Kraals: How Disarmament Leads to Dependence

The scrubby landscape, on which few plants but thorn bushes, briars, and the occasional acacia grow, can only have been so sculpted by cattle. Where in some places you come across Médecins Sans Frontières, here in Kotido, I come across Vétérinaire Sans Frontières. A little further up the road there is a veterinary pharmacy supply store named Happy Cow Fields. Herds of goats tended by boys (feet and faces dust-smitten already so early in the morning) mark their presence with spasmodic bleats and little tinkling of bells. There’s the occasional sheep here and there, but mostly cattle. Cattle, more than people, shape the town. That persistent ting ting tinkle is a cowbell. The smell of Karamoja is the smell of cattle, cow dung, and the sweet smell of cows that makes you think of raw milk. Animal hooves have broken up the topsoil. Hedges and plants flourish if they are indigestible. What business is not about livestock is abrupt, ad hoc. The run-down cars rusting throughout the town would

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elsewhere have been kept in repair or cannibalized for parts. Southerners man the stalls and shacks of moulded plastic and rubber wear. The town is full of what’s not useful for cattle. The walk through other towns that build momentum into some corner or new street, here it ends with a view of the land sweeping away towards the horizon. There, writ large, the countryside is cropped, shaped and deformed by cattle.

So it is with the people. Young men, when not walking behind a herd of cattle, look like they have just left a kraal somewhere or are going to one; shuka-caped, headgeared, faces and chests cicatrized, sticks on shoulders, arms up these sticks like on a cruciform, these young men communicate the masculine but mythical masculinity of Karamoja.

The cattle-herding imperative informs the fashion. The shuka slung across the shoulders, running down in a wedge over polyester shorts (mostly green, blue and burgundy), the long-distance trekking wiry muscles, down to the thick-soled car-tire sandals—these are appurtenances of the cattle fields. As are the long cattle-prods men carry from early boyhood, knobkerries born as third limbs, amulets with sharpened edges that with a swipe of the arm turns into a deadly weapon, the sheathed knives fastened to waists which show and conceal as the shuka flap with each footstep, the small, yellow jerry can or water bottle, knitted wool head-gear. The Spartan sartorial style posts an imperative that shaves a community of all other possibilities. You live for cattle; you die for cattle; a life as beautifully exact as it is harshly uncompromising.

In an area one hour north of Kotido there is now fear that the Karamojong are losing control over their animals. It is a cheerless turn of good fortunes. The standing enmity between the Dodoth and Turkana has not been assuaged, has not been settled the pastoralist way even if the probability of violent death has been reduced. But this quasi-peace is not bringing happiness about cattle. The Ugandan disarmament exercise, with its combination of stick and carrot, has been largely successful. After a generation, the gun has come and gone. Elsewhere cattle herding goes largely unmolested. In Kaabong, things returned to normal, but did not stay there for long, and passed on to a new dimension.

Lest they tempt the Turkana, the cows are sequestered in protected kraals in Kasilo, Loleia, Lomsen, Loclom, Kapedo and Loyoro. Cows move where the Ugandan army decides. The army’s decisions are based on safety zones. Safety zones do not always enclose good grazing.

We stop some 10 kilometers from Kaabong town, which we can see at the rising slope of the plains in
the distance. Further to the north lies Mt. Murongole, Kaabong's own mountain. We are already in that triangular horn of Uganda's northeastern border, protruding deep into South Sudan and Kenya. Yet before you reach the inner tip of this horn, one comes upon another mountain, Mt. Zulia. The Toposa, the Dassenech, and the Nyangatom live to the north and east across the border. They are fully armed; southwards, the Dodoth are not.

We have stopped on the flat tableland rising above the general plain, under large clouds that cast idyllic shadows on the now green expanse. This is the idealised pastoral they print on milk and cheese packets. From all directions we see long into the distance. Reinvigorated with rainfall, Karamoja is pleasing to the eye.

Jean Mark manages to convince two elderly men to talk to us. Soon others follow, and we end up in an impromptu focus group. Apana Agira is an octogenarian. Typical of the elderly I have come across here, it is only the white hair and geriatric skin that betrays his age. He walks ramrod straight, stick to shoulder, a fantastic curved Karamojong stool in his fingers. His eyes mist up when he talks of what life was like before 1984 – bar Lopiar. Animals grazed freely, he says. Spears, bows and arrows and knobkerries could only do so much damage in a raid. With elders in firm control of society, the brakes were quickly applied whenever a cycle of reciprocal raiding threatened to spin out of control. The sanctioning of raids by the elderly took into account such matters. He recounts how agriculture mixed in with pastoralism. Lost animals could be regenerated by bartering grain for a few cows needed to begin the long and arduous re-stocking process.

“There was little fear of conflict,” he says. “Animals roamed freely. People were respectful, elders were in control.”

The gun changed that.

“Now the youth don’t listen”, he says and hangs his head. “This is a hard generation. Now as parents we are stranded. If not us, who will the children listen to?”

There have been attempts to channel the youth energy into what in Uganda is called “LDU”, Local Defence Units. There is little enthusiasm for these government militias. Now some young men have joined the focus group. We are sitting under a small tree providing scanty shade. At the end of the open field is a military detachment. To our right is a kraal, the protected kraal. A handful of soldiers walk toward us. A man in his 40s puts up his hand to speak. He gives his name as Aling Lukodetemoi. Whenever there are jobs available, like road maintenance, he claims, “We elders rush in and compete against the youth. We the elders have be-
come so selfish, so greedy, we want all the jobs. When food-for-work comes, we elders jump in. The youth are left out.” This crowding out of the youth, Aling says, is the reason young men have turned to thuggery. He points at the gaggle of young men present and asks “isn’t that true?” They look to the ground.

Action Contre le Faim, a humanitarian organisation, he says, has come up with a program to de-silt dams. But how many young men have they employed? He outlines programs that could benefit Karamoja: road maintenance, a worthy occupation given the ride we have so far had; water harvesting, planting trees—the land badly needs reforestation; then there is the question of minerals, and gold. There is silence at the mention of gold. Those Karamojong who may think that cattle may be an accursed gift from God should re-think what they know of agony when it comes to gold.

Alika is not finished. Even the cattle itself, he says, can yield greater quantities of milk if only the Karamojong are taught better husbandry. But Alika’s ideas seem far-fetched to his listeners. The discussion returns to kraals and conflict and the Ugandan army. The army, they say, had promised that kraals in Dodoth would be merged—apparently a popular idea—to make it harder for Turkana raiders to come calling. This would be an alternative [unclear what this merging means] to protected kraals. The word “protected” seems, in northern Uganda, to euphemise the exact opposite. I first encountered the term in Lang’o and Acholi, where the “protected” people said they were experiencing the worst days of their lives.

The protected kraals don’t shift when they become clogged with disease-friendly detritus or when proximate pastures are exhausted. Pastoralists are by definition mobile. When a kraal becomes congested, they decamp. Now these kraals are three feet deep in dung. The cattle must be forced to enter them at night. They do not give as much milk. Calves die easily. Adult cows are infirm and scrawny.

As the discussion advances, new revelations emerge that portray the 1980s as even more consequential than I have so far learnt. Lopiar forced the Karamojong into alternative lifestyles. It is the period when Karamojong children first went to school in serious numbers. If cattle were gone, would school not provide what did not come naturally to the people?

But the atmosphere, created by what I gather to be the inability of the Dodoth to command their herds, is not suited for happy endings. Even education comes in for criticism. Alika, for all his modernising talk, says now there is conflict between the educated and un-
educated Karamojong. The former, when not hiding or apologising for their Karamojong identity, return to lord over and to prosper as middle men, fixers and translators who claim the lion’s share of foreign assistance.

He’s not finished. “Current records show that most of those arrested for theft are school dropouts.” He pinpoints 1984 as the beginning of the education plague. In that year, acceptance of education had seemed to be going smoothly. But Lorenge Lup – Red Earth - struck. “People dug, ploughed but no rain came.” The resultant famine emptied the schools.

The children from Loreng Lup, he says, formed warrior gangs. Perhaps he spoke too vehemently, and too fast without thinking through each point. He can’t sustain his narrative: “Anyway,” he concludes, “government should have a school-feeding program.”

Army Sergeant Amado steps in and explains why the guns were taken and the cattle put in protect kraals. He says that just recently the Toposa stole seven animals, which they have yet to recover. And there are plans to clean the kraals, he explains.

I feel a withdrawal of participation as the focus group becomes polite. Is it the presence of the army they are acquiescing to? Maybe not. Peter Lokwi, a kraal leader and a very able one judging from his build and irascible manner, who joined us late, speaks up. Dressed in full trousers and polo shirt and thick car tire sandals, he stirs up confusion. He’s gravelly-voiced, brusque, and not dressed in the shorts, cape, headgear and beads; he does not carry the obligatory stool, nor knobkerrie. His appearance makes one think of a cattle-trader, one of those brisk characters commandeering the butcher-section of souks. That gravelly voice condemns the disarmament exercise.
He does not appear aware of the soldiers’ standing by. Or perhaps he’s speaking like that because they are listening. The soldiers’ faces are masked. As I start to fear that something unpleasant might happen, Peter Lokwi raises a laugh and proclaims that the problem now is that everyone has a mobile phone. “Can a way be found to disable the warriors’ phones?”

A politician then, but not one looking for votes. I begin to see how it is. The names of kraal leaders I have heard so far have been proffered as synecdoche – personification of the era they commanded. The past recedes. Only the memorialisation remains. The beginning of interneceine conflict in the mid-80s are today marked by Lopiar and by Lorenge Lup as much as by the kraal leaders of days gone by like Kuduyara and Lokonkulie: two kraal heads and two acts of nature.

In a generation from now, will protected kraals be equated with a Dodoth catastrophe, or whichever act of nature they will attach to them—how do you say deep dung in Ngakarimojong? Will these times be remembered for the calamity that befell this area during the era of Peter Lokwi? It will not be the kind of legacy memori-al-hungry leaders want.

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