Long’ilong’ole: Mediating Violence and Change

We are in Amudat, where dewed tufts of grass in the shining fields under Mt. Kadam catch the rising sun. It has been raining. We left the Amudat-Nakapiripirit road and went into the bush. The car weaves among the wiry riverine acacia that characterise this wilderness in Namalera. But we won’t be able to drive for much longer; the trees are clogging up the tracks. The kraal we are visiting is further ahead, beyond the thicket of acacias. It is eerie here, the land simultaneously wooded yet open.

“For the last five years, before disarmament took place, people had to find ways to escape death,” says Linos Lotem, the field monitor for these areas. “You could not find people here. This was a battle ground.” ‘Battle’ is a new term I am hearing since coming to Karamoja.

“You could not keep an animal for five years.”

A. K. KAIZA

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Who are the people taking animals from the Pokot? I ask.

“Pian,” he says. He says “Pian”, not “The Pian”. I note this inflection. He goes on: “Matheniko, Bokora, Turkana.”

Long’ilong’ole Lomuma was barely eleven years old when the volleys of gunshots erupted shortly before midnight in December 2005. They came right before midnight and it was too dark to see anyone,” he says, “There were so many Bokora. All the animals were taken. And four people along with them.”

That there “were so many Bokora” would not have been clear that night. Unfolding facts fed memory backwards. The raiders captured close to seven hundred animals. The account led into what begun what I am now learning is a regular ritual. Groups of young men, with the harsh fact of dispossession ricocheting at them from the faces of children and women, picked up their guns and went in pursuit of the Bokora. I imagined the scene on Mt. Moroto—gun-slinging young men, bent over reading tracks. But with so many animals, anyone can be a tracker.

It was not just the warriors of the Namalera and Morita kraals who went out in pursuit. More battalions poured in from across the border in Kenya. Pokot are not Karamojong; and as you hear it from the Karamojong, the Pokot are the most anti-Karamojong of the north Rift Valley’s pastoralist peoples. In any case, there is little friendship between the two communities. But what anti-Karamojong actually means is that they reflect a trait that is not present in Karamoja: internal raids are not permitted within Pokot, and they do not ally with outsiders against fellow Pokot. An attack on any Pokot is an attack on all Pokot.

The tracks from the December 2005 raid led as far as Napak, to the West. Linos Lotem said it was the back and forth series of reprisals which ensued that turned this area into a battleground. But the ritual of the counter-raid is not the problem that stuck in my mind. Long’ilong’ole, a young man barely 20 yet hardy already, gruff-throat-ed and speaking with the brusque mannerism that reminded me of Peter Lokwi, the leader of his age group, a young man with the two lower front teeth removed, says it in a matter-of-fact voice.

“Old men hanged themselves.”

The seriousness of the raid comes alive for me. I pause, in silence asking for explanation.

“Where will he go to borrow from?” Long’ilong’ole asks. And I ask, “borrow what?”

I rue the harshness of a fact, like an honourable death for the shame you never invited.
By all accounts, it is becoming clear to me now, 2005 could be the nadir of a period that started with the coming of the gun back in 1979.

“After raids, when old men lose all their animals, they hang themselves,” Linos Lotem explains.

The fall-out from Lopiar spread to the Pokot. When the ten-year intra-Karamoja peace hiatus collapsed in 1992, the Pian attacked Nabolong, a Pokot area in Uganda. The first raid was in July 1993. Over 180 Pian and Pokot were killed. A second raid followed in December. The largest in the memory of the two sides, it left 231 dead. Pokot clans from two countries assembled.

There’s a cat-like sharpness about Long’ilong’ole. His head is shaved save for the crown. Rough thickened hands, rubber bangles, a long sleeved polyester hunter green shirt clashed with the red and green Maasai blanket fastened to his waist over white-striped blue and burgundy nylon shorts. His eyes focus on an unseen object in the bush. He speaks in fits and starts. Pokot when heard the first time is a heavily guttural language that sounds like a series of staccato commands.

Ask a question and Long’ilong’ole starts, hands, legs and torso swaying to emphasise a point, vehement arms flaying most every word. He will not have to fight to be kraal leader when the time comes.

His friends watch, shake their heads, and laugh. Long’ilong’ole’s understudies double as audience and chorus. They let him do most of the speaking. They offer a point, a rejoinder, or a mutually understood ehh of emphasis. This is not Karamoja. It is a different land. Men and women are circumcised, enjoined by rites that bind.

In Karamoja, whoever wanted to speak, spoke. Women sat with the men and claimed the right to talk. In Pokot a single voice holds the many together. There had been another daytime raid in August 2005. Tome Kapelikalis, an old man whose age no one remembers, lost all his animals.

“He just died,” Linos Lotem says. “Just looked at the empty kraal and died.” After Kakingol in the mountain I see how that is possible.

“The younger men are still energetic. Because of the pressure from the wives and children, they go on revenge missions. They cannot hang themselves: “Who will look after the children?”

I have not heard friendly words about the Pokot from the Karamojong. Long’ilong’ole brushes this aside as though it’s not worth mentioning.

“We always make friendship with these people,” he says. “From December to March we are friends, when this place is dry, when the
animals are close to Pian. We make peace. But immediately the raids come, we break the friendship. When we go to make raids, we don’t discriminate and say I made friends with this person. I can kill that person even though I know him.”

“What about a permanent friendship then?”

Long’ilong’ole looks into the shrubs. A sixth young man is walking up. He’s carrying a green striped blanket. It flaps. He’s wearing nothing underneath. A seventh young man with his blanket in his arms has nothing on except his earrings. They spread the blanket on the ground, lie down in a sunny patch, cover themselves, and go to sleep. We are under Mt. Kadam. It was cold last night.

“We could have better friendship,” Long’ilong’ole replies. “But we do not have a good mediator.

“We don’t enjoy raiding. We are only forced into it by circumstances. People think it’s our culture, or that it’s some kind of ritual. It’s not our culture.”

December 2005 has marked Long’ilong’ole. A scar the size of his palm mars the inner thigh of his left leg. There are scars all over his body, some nicks from thorn bushes. But there are knife cuts too.

“Outsiders think that pastoralists are simply violent. They have no respect for us.”

Last night in Nakapiripirit, a government employee from Kumam, in Kaberamaido, on the shores of Lake Kiyoga told me plainly, “These people are primitive.” He has lived in Karamoja for 20 years.

Long’ilong’ole scowls.

“We are aware. We keep animals for prestige. I have bulls. Prestige so we can be called rich.”

This is a kind of bullishness you don’t hear among the more self-conscious, perhaps chastened, Karamojong. “We learned from our ancestors that animals are everything. We look only at cows. When we go to towns, they call us outsiders. Yet what we fail to learn is that you can have up to 500 heads of cattle but in one day, after a single day, you can lose all of them. If you still have life and strength, you can get them back.”

But things have changed. The reduction of raids and livestock theft due to disarmament has quieted things in Pokot as in Karamoja. Loss of cattle is no longer in the hundreds or thousands. Two or three will frequently disappear. It is more likely for stolen animals to be tracked down and returned. Even at this reduced level of loss, the intervention is proving unpopular among the kraals. The army has upped the
stakes. Whenever stolen animals are tracked to a particular kraal, all the animals in the homestead are impounded. It is not unusual for victims to inflate the number of stolen animals. Normalisation is throwing up things once not thought about.

“When our grandmothers were married, a lot of cows were paid in dowry, fifty, even seventy animals. Our mothers were married for forty. In those past years, the reason they were able to exchange a lot of animals is because there were no raids. For us, even fifteen cows is a large dowry. In the whole of Karamoja, one can now marry a woman for one cow. The same cow circulates, rotating from marriage to marriage.”

I notice that, even here in Pokot, occasional reference is made to Karamoja, not as the Karamojong homeland, but as pastoralist land generally. Legend has it that their name originated with the ancient Teso and Lang’i who before their conversion to Luo, said these were the homes of the ‘tired’—the old. In Ateso, old or tired is mojong, the plural is emojong. The description would have had to have a Luo flavour, for the possessive pronoun in Ateker languages is “Lo”; “Ka” is the Luo equivalent. Even the “ra” rings Luo in origin. As is often the case for such names, it is the outsiders that christen you. To yourself, you are simply ‘the people’.

“Education is what can make us change,” Long’ilong’ole says. “We don’t want to be like our grandparents. Every family has to send two or three children to school.”

“Those two to three children are still only boys,” Linos Lotem adds. “They are campaigning to have girls educated as well. The campaign against circumcising girls is high here. We are encouraging people to build houses with strong walls and windows. Manyattas are not ventilated. We are telling them that agriculture is not bad.”

The field monitor continues: People are starting to realise how damaging raids are. When you are raided, first of all, you are traumatised. You think of the survival of the family.
You can imagine the women. They are in the kraal purposely to collect milk. When cows are taken, it creates a lot of trauma. The old die. Children are malnourished.”

I have failed to nail down what people feel about their animals. When I have asked, answers have been evasive, as though the relationship is personal, like a marriage, and not to be discussed with strangers. Long’ilong’ole means a brown animal with a white head. But Long’ilong’ole admits to some feeling for animals when he says that after a raid, people often try to find animals that looked like the one they lost. It’s like falling in love for a second time.

From what I have heard, the Pokot are ultra-pastoralists. They do not describe themselves as agro-pastoral. They are cattle people, an economic monoculture. Farming was never in their history. The Karamojong, they say, are soft. They eat grass. In the glory days of cows aplenty, a Pokot seen eating posho in town was not allowed to drink milk for an entire week.

Yet even that is starting to shift. “Why do we not eat grass?” is beginning to make sense for the few Ugandan Pokot who have ventured into farming. Grain, the Pokot have discovered, remains when the animals are gone. Part of the attraction derives from the fact that some of the maize can be sold to buy animals. “If cows can come out of maize, why not?” They have learnt this from the Kenyan Pokot who have been farming for years.