The enclosure in Kopoth is a meter thick in parts. Whole tree stems and inter-locked branches rise as high as 10 meters. The entrance is low. I peer inside. There’s an ante-enclosure, like a lobby. Behind it other stakes rise, as thick as the outer ring. These are like rooms, enclosure upon enclosure. “It is a kraal,” Jean Mark explains. You cannot tell if there are any animals inside. You can hardly smell animals. It seems there are no people here. Jean Mark makes a call. A small boy appears. We have come to see Brother Mark Kawar, a man of the church.

Grownups emerge carrying chairs. We are strangers. Strangers are not welcome inside kraals. We sit in the front yard, out in the open. Brother Mark is himself a peace builder, like Jean Mark. He was born here and lives here, a 48-year old man.

He describes the 1970s as a period of turmoil, he also says it was perhaps the last time people in Karamoja lived as they had for centuries. Although the Ugandan army, losing its discipline, had begun to prey on the people, taking their animals, Karamojong society had not yet broken
down. The soldiers were not in Karamoja to improve things for the people. Their concern was the wildlife reserves that occupy the parts of Karamoja with reliable supply of water. In times of drought, these places are tempting for cattle keepers. Game rangers keep them out.

Brother Mark is beginning his narrative from the 1970s for a reason. The key date he focuses on is April 11 1979. On that day a new, lethal element drops into Karamoja, the intrusion that would tear the society apart. It was the start of three decades of turmoil sweeping away herds, and produced the monument to the two church-men we drove past: Father Mario Mantovani and Brother Godfrey Kiryowa killed in December 2003.

Before the overthrow of the Idi Amin regime in April 1979, guns were scarce in Karamoja, a rarity in the pastoralist communities of Uganda and Kenya. According to the folklore from here on the Uganda escarpment bordering Pokot West, the first guns appeared in 1911, during the reign of Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II.

It was the Turkana that got their hands on those guns, but only just a handful. They were still enough to give the Turkana leverage over their neighbours. Stories and songs relay the Turkana sense of supremacy during that time.

“Turkana dominated the Karamojong and called them women,” Jean Mark tells us. “We Karamojong used to sit in silence because they had guns. They sang a song saying that a man has come to take the cows. You go and feed on posho and soup. A man has come to take the white cows.”

The Jie, who like the Dodoth, enjoy no periodic fraternity with the Turkana are said to have obtained their first firearm when they killed a gun-wielding Turkana. But it is folklore, undated, names unknown. There were periodic opportunities, as when warriors learnt how to ambush military vehicles. Guns were not unfamiliar by the 1970s. But they were not easily obtainable, one rifle exchanged for as many as 60 heads of cattle. All of this changed in April 1979.

When the Ugandan army fled before a combined Tanzanian and Ugandan-exile military force, the armoury in Moroto was left undefended. The Matheniko Karamojong broke in.

“Women were carrying guns on their heads like firewood,” Brother Mark says. “The Matheniko became powerful. But they had many, too many guns. They started selling the guns. They traded them for cattle. Guns spread to the Jie, the Dodoth. Soon, everyone was carrying guns.”
As fate would have it, the civil war in Sudan, abandoned in 1972, was resuming. The Ogaden war that reached a climax in 1978 opened a third gate. The new weapons market plunged the whole of this pastoralist region—Kenya, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia—into communal violence and war. A decade later Somalia saw its own collapsing military bleed guns into the general population after the fall of Siad Barre.

“Young men who carried guns did not see why they should listen to their elders,” Brother Mark explains. Yet more was coming. Karamoja had barely learnt to shoot guns, let alone understand the damage they could wreak when a period described as the worst in their living memory, swept across the land.

The Karamoja famine of the 1980s is largely forgotten today. The Ethiopian famine of 1984 is the highest peak in the graph of famine statistics illustrating the new extended droughts that engendered end-of-the-world predictions for African societies of the Sahel. But in 1980, even worse news was coming out of Karamoja. The famine developed into a three-pronged attack across the land. First the drought came, killing the cattle. A cholera epidemic of unprecedented proportions, followed. It is not recorded how many animals died; the famine left its mark in the annals of human mortality. An estimated 21 per cent of the population died. When that many people die, a society cannot hope to keep its culture. History is broken. Yet for the newly well-armed Karamojong, the worst was yet to come.

The famine gave name to a condition called The Karamoja Syndrome. It is, defined on the UNICEF website as a “…euphemism for the ecological, political, social, cultural, economic and demographic barriers to sustainable development”. The Karamojong captured the event in a non-technical, more poetic word. The Karamojong called it the Sweep, Lopiar.

Before 1980, Karamoja, in the minds of the neighbours, was shorthand for comical, half-dressed cow worshipers. After Lopiar, Karamoja became the menacing land of mythical warriors. It is this image of Karamoja that stuck. Few remember what Karamoja was like before. A wave of calamitous political change in Uganda had also started in 1980 with a civil war in the south. Two military coups followed in 1985 and 1986. The famine passed, but cultural extinction might have followed if the cattle depleted in Karamoja could not be replaced. In this political and security vacuum, the Karamojong struck.

“The clans put aside their differences and went to raid in Teso, Lang’o and Acholi,” says Brother Mark.
I am only learning now that the day in 1987, when I carried my suitcase on my head and fled to Soroti town, was part of a sweep. Now that I look back, it felt as if we were being swept in a flood from a most consequential source.

The raids were a waste in the end. Nothing was gained. Many of the cattle the Karamojong brought in were unsuited to the harsh climate there. What the Turkana and the Pokot did not manage to take back in counter attacks simply died. A reputation for violence was earned for nothing in return.

By the early 1990s, the guns exchanged for cattle had come back home; the migrating weapons were exacting a high price. The ten-year interlude ended in 1992. The imperative for relief food distribution had forced Karamoja into camps. As it happened, stories circulated that an attack on a kraal by a man from the opposite camp triggered a counter attack. It is said that one Kuduyara, a Dodoth kraal leader, led an attack on Jie kraals. As is commonly the case, the identity of the suspect did not matter. He was Dodoth, not Karamojong.

“This is how the peace was destroyed,” says Brother Mark. “Disharmony was sowed inside the camp. People abandoned food. The government was very far away from the people. And the people had guns.”

Something close to civil war broke out within Karamoja. The Acholi, Teso and Lang’i were now without animals. The Pokot and Turkana were the only people with cattle in sufficient numbers and were now heavily armed opponents. Jie raided Dodoth, Dodoth attacked the Jie, Matheniko hit the Bokora, and the Pian, and back again. The Ugandan army deployed in Karamoja tried to step in. But with Karamojong now equally well armed, the intervention turned into open warfare. But at least the army was present and could, if it wished, call in additional firepower. But in 1994, another well armed but politically motivated group, was fighting against the Ugandan state. The war with the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) war was reaching new levels. This drew the army away from Karamoja. Like a sequel to Lopiar, the following ten years brought hell to Karamoja. When the word “hell” is used in Karamoja, there’s an ironic accuracy to the term. After the army arrested the situation in northern Uganda, following the last, deadly gambit of the Lord’s Resistance Army in 2003-2004, they returned to Karamoja. By then, the herds had recovered to such a level that on a single day, as many as 18,000 head of cattle could be snatched from Karamojong kraals. In what Brother Mark refers to as the Kanyangangiro incident, of March 2005, a group of Turkana who had settled at a good grazing point in Uganda were asked to leave.
“You know the Turkana are sarcastic,” Brother Mark explains. “As they were leaving, they used bad language against the Dodoth. They had come forcefully and settled on Dodoth land.” The Dodoth were not taking it anymore.

Their retreat degenerated into a full flight for the overmatched Turkana. The elderly and children who could not get away quickly fell, many were killed or injured. In all, it is estimated that during March 2005, the Turkana lost some 30,000 heads of cattle.

What would the Turkana do to reclaim their loss? By now governments and aid agencies had grown wise to the cycle of events. The scale of the fight was such that the Ugandan and Kenyan government were drawn in. An NGO called Development Alternates Incorporated was contracted by USAID to assess the conflict. They claimed water was the main source of the problem. The Kenyan army transported tanks full of water to Turkana land to help contain the ever-worsening threat of war. Access to water supply was established, water holes dug, and a buffer zone running 40 kilometres created to separate the combatants. The army tracked the lost Turkana cattle and what was recovered was given back to them.

It was at this point that the Ugandan army won some time and returned to Karamoja. This time they went for the guns. Large swathes of Karamoja were cordoned off for search and recovery operations. But the manner of disarmament drew howls of international protest. Donors, particularly the Danish government, sponsored a program that paid cash for those who voluntarily surrendered their guns.

Two decades after 1979, guns had fallen in value and risen in deadliness. A bullet was now selling for 50 Ugandan shillings, cheaper than a mint drop. And the gun? Its price had fallen to 150,000 shillings, or sixty US dollars. You couldn’t buy a healthy heifer at that price. In the swankier parts of Kampala, this was hardly enough to cover a meal for a family of three in a restaurant.