

Creating Peace in an Armed Society: Karamoja, Uganda, 1996.

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Introduction to Karamoja

Located in the northeastern part of Uganda, Karamoja is a 27,200 square kilometer area of semi-arid savannah, bush and mountains. To the east, the escarpment drops down into Turkana District in Kenya; to the north is the Sudan; to the west and south are Ugandan districts populated by Acholi, Teso and Sebei people. Within Karamoja, the dominant groups are the Dodoth in the north, the Jie in the central region, and in the south a cluster of closely related ethnic groups known as Bokora, Matheniko, and Pian all of whom are referred to generally as the Karimojong. In the southeast, a Kalenjin-speaking group, the Pakot (or Upe), occupy a territory that overlaps the Uganda-Kenya border. Living in the mountainous areas around the edges of Karamoja are several smaller ethnic groups. From 1911 to 1971, Karamoja was a single district, but in 1971 it was divided into two administrative districts, Northern Karamoja and Southern Karamoja, later renamed Kotido District and Moroto District.

By far the most important ecological feature of this region is its rainfall pattern. As a semi-arid area it may get short rains during April and a longer rainy season from June to early September; however, this pattern is not reliable and in many years the rains are sparse, or fail altogether. Thus, drought and hunger are a recurrent feature of life in Karamoja. Although in years of adequate rainfall sorghum and millet provide most of their nutrition, the Dodoth, Jie, and Karimojong have adapted to this often harsh environment by focusing much of their energy on their herds of livestock--principally cattle, but also goats and sheep, and, in a few areas, some camels. In addition to being a major source of dietary protein, these animals, especially cattle, represent wealth, both economically and symbolically. During the long dry seasons the herdsmen leave their permanent settlements and move their cattle to temporary encampments near pasture and watering places located to the west and south of the central plains, often crossing over into the territory of neighboring groups and districts.

Competition for scarce resources, particularly water and pasture, and the high value placed on cattle have produced a culture of raiding and warfare within which men are noted for their bravery and their wealth. Men marry with cattle and historically bridewealth "prices" have been very high (Quam, 1978). Young men have a powerful incentive to establish their reputations and build their own herds through mounting raids on other pastoral groups. Traditionally, these activities, as well as other group policy decisions, have been controlled through a social organization of male age grades within which the elders have wielded great political and ritual power (Dyson-Hudson, 1966; Thomas, 1965; Gulliver, 1953).

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/1/3.pdf>

Two Decades of Chaos and Change

In the last two decades, a combination of calamities has produced profound changes in the population, economy, and culture of these semi-pastoral societies. Beginning in the decade of the 1970s, these warrior herdsmen who had always fought with spears began to acquire modern firearms. Recurrent food shortages due to localized drought, increased raiding between groups, particularly by well-armed Turkana, thefts and killings by armed bandits, and general political turmoil resulted in a major famine in 1980. The dynamic that generated this disaster has been well-summarized by Alnwick (1985: 132-133).

The widespread insecurity in Karamoja in the latter half of 1979 and early 1980 resulted in many family groups planting far less than in a normal year because people feared to cultivate far from the safety of their relatively well-protected dwellings. Many families may also have had seed from the previous harvest stolen or destroyed. Erratic rainfall in some parts of the district in 1980 resulted in low yields from the already reduced cultivated areas.... General insecurity and the rapidly changing balance of power between rival groups also resulted in the herds of some groups being taken away to remote corners of the region in an attempt to avoid them being taken [stolen]. Many families lost all of their cattle and wealth in raids. The settled population, consisting mainly of women, children and old people, no longer had access to milk or blood from the herds. More importantly, insecurity within the area and within the country as a whole resulted in a more or less complete breakdown of trade and commerce. Families who received a poor harvest, either due to climatic conditions or because of the small area planted, could not trade cattle for grain. Many families no longer had access to cattle, either because the cattle had been taken by rival groups or because the cattle had been hidden in distant and secret grazing areas. Even families with cattle to sell could not find a trader willing to take the risk of transporting cattle out of Karamoja because of the high risk that he would be attacked and lose not only the cattle he was transporting but his life as well. For similar reasons virtually no grain from outside the region was brought in and families who still had money could find little grain to buy at any price.

Massive food relief efforts by international organizations managed to halt this disaster, but not before "21 percent of the population died in the twelve months up to December 1980, mostly from starvation" (Biellik and Henderson, 1981: 1333). An estimated 50,000 people died, 25,000 of them children (Biellik and Henderson, 1981). Famine of the early 1980s was ended, famine recurred in 1984-5 and again in 1991. The causes and consequences of these severe hardships were all too familiar.

A drought destroyed the 1984 crop in northern Karamoja while cattle raiding in south Karamoja spilled over into Kenya and neighbouring districts. This necessitated a joint Kenya Uganda military operation to quell the violent raiding and displaced an estimated 75% of the population in the extreme south, rendering the whole of Karamoja famine prone in early 1985 (Dodge, 1986: 760).

A cycle of famine has come to the Karamojong again. A homestead of more than 500 people near Moroto recently dwindled to only 100 women and children. Almost everyone else left in search of food [F]ood expected from international relief agencies had not arrived. Relief

groups have been hesitant to deliver the food because Karamojong warriors held up trucks entering the region last year, in one instance killing a driver (Perlez, 1991).

Armed violence and the deterioration of the traditional economy continued to transform the society and ecology of Karamoja well into the 1990s. With their cattle herds depleted or gone, and many of their traditional agricultural areas abandoned because of fear of armed raiders, poverty-stricken people turned to producing charcoal to sell to townspeople in the administrative centers and military posts. As a result, many of the trees and large bushes have disappeared from the plains and the lower slopes of the mountains. Clearing the brush has opened up land to be potentially reclaimed by savannah grasses (Wilson, 1985), but the broader impact of deforestation may be a further decrease in rainfall. Also, concentrating cultivation in a smaller number of more secure areas close to towns and military posts has caused soil depletion and lower crop yields. In the past, these pastoralists had never relied on game animals for their subsistence, and thus had never developed a hunting culture with ritual and practical constraints on harvesting wildlife. Thus, more recently, with modern rifles in their hands and hunger in their homesteads, they have literally decimated the large populations of zebra, antelope, giraffe, ostrich, and other fauna that were abundant in Karamoja twenty years ago.

Cattle herds have also been reduced and redistributed through raiding. Although few hard data are available, the following statements give some indication of these changes:

In the course of time, the ratio of cattle per person in Karamoja has dropped from 6 in 1920 to less than 2 today (1991) (Ocan, 1992: 14).

During the field surveys in Karamoja, Teso and north Bugisu all people said they were raided indiscriminately during the raids of 1983/84 and 1986-90.... For Moroto and Kotido the most armed were the least raided. Out of about 160 respondents in Karamoja, 47 had lost cattle completely. Twenty nine had become very poor and were herding other people's animals for a living, without homes of their own (Ocan, 1992: 24).

The best armed among the Karamoja tribes are the Jie and the Matheniko (a subtribe among the Karamojong). The least armed are the Dodoth. During 1979-81 the Dodoth, ill-equipped to defend their stock from better armed raiders, lost practically all of their cattle (Cisternino, 1985: 155).

Recent conversations with people in Karamoja confirm this general picture. Although wealth was not equally distributed in traditional Karimojong society, nearly every family had enough livestock for subsistence, and the size of family herds waxed and waned depending on the skills of the herdsman and the winds of fortune. A man of even modest wealth could exercise some influence in the council of elders. In the last two decades, however, some individuals have become extremely wealthy in cattle through successful large-scale raiding. They command the allegiance of many other armed men who have little or no wealth and have attached themselves to these exceptionally rich and powerful leaders. On the other hand, many men and their families have been driven into poverty by the loss of their herds and as a result have also lost political influence.

Ben Okudi (1992) paints a bleak picture of the effects of this new inequality. Many people have become so destitute that they are now scavenging for food in garbage dumps. To feed their children, some Karimojong women have resorted to working as prostitutes, a practice that was almost unheard of until recently. According to Omwony-Ojok (1996), chronic drinking, not

just of local sorghum beer, but often of distilled spirits, is becoming more prevalent, and is undermining the stature and traditional authority of parents and elders. During these years of turmoil and insecurity, young men who began to go to school often did not finish and have become unemployed school leavers. These alienated youth are easily recruited into raiding and banditry.

The towns have grown as poor people have migrated to them seeking a meager income and some security. As a result, the basic amenities of town life have declined. For example, Moroto Town, the largest town in all of Karamoja, no longer has running water or 24-hour electricity; many of the shops along its main street are boarded up, and the hospital does not have the staff or supplies to provide basic health services. At the same time, the region has lost population as people have migrated out of Karamoja to neighboring districts where they have become traders and farmers.

The raiding and banditry have taken their toll in human lives as well. Cisternino (1985: 155) claims that "[t]he Jie tribe ..., which counts some 25,000 persons, during 1981 lost not less than 1000 young men in gun battles." John Wilson (1985: 165), who had lived in Karamoja for many years both before and during the recent troubles, makes the following statement:

The change in weapons was dramatic and resulted in horrifying carnage between 1980 and 1982. In fact, so many men, women and children were needlessly slaughtered in massacres of whole villages and settlements during this period, say for a hundred or so cattle, that the leaders of different warring tribes finally met in order to call a halt to the killing.

Wilson is known to be unsympathetic to many aspects of traditional Karimojong life, and his account may be somewhat exaggerated. Nevertheless, according to Dr. Robert Limlim (1996), the Medical Officer for Moroto District, in the district's one really functioning hospital, a mission facility in Matagn, many of the patients are brought in with gunshot wounds.

A Brief History of Guns in Karamoja

Firearms first made their appearance in Karamoja in the late nineteenth century. They were in the hands of ivory hunters and traders, the majority of whom came from Ethiopia. According to Barber (1968), the British colonial power at the time became concerned, principally for geopolitical reasons, about the rumors of gun-running and territorial inroads being made by Ethiopian warlords possibly representing the rapidly expanding Ethiopian Empire of Menelik II. This ungoverned and distant frontier was potentially strategic for continuing control of the Nile. Finally, in 1911, a British patrol was sent to establish British authority, to run the Ethiopians and other unsavory rascals out, and to disarm the tribesmen. The commander of the patrol reported great success in seizing large quantities of arms from the local tribesmen. Lamphear (1976), who has written the most thorough oral history of this region, convincingly disputes these claims of large numbers of guns in the hands of local people. Although they did acquire a few firearms, they continued to rely on their traditional weaponry and indigenous military tactics in their warfare with neighboring groups. Thus, when pressured by the British patrol, they surrendered what few guns they possessed without a struggle. By 1921 the British had firmly established a military administration in Karamoja, and guns were not allowed in the

hands of any local people except the chiefs that the British appointed. This situation was to continue for the next fifty years.

In the decade of the 1960s, the Turkana from the west and the Toposa from the north, armed with modern firearms, especially high-powered rifles, began frequent incursions into Karamoja, raiding for cattle and whatever else they could take. The armed police of the Ugandan government who were stationed in Karamoja to maintain law and order seemed to be completely ineffectual in responding to these raids. Local informants claimed that the police would waste precious pursuit time by interviewing the victims of raids at great length, filling out long forms with useless information, and then asking the victims what the raiders' likely path of flight might be. Finally, they would drive off in their vehicles to pursue the raiders, leaving behind the local herdsmen who might have been able to follow the tracks of the stolen cattle. If the police did encounter the raiders, the Turkana or the Toposa, being well-armed and knowledgeable about how to fight in that terrain, could easily defeat the police militarily. Meanwhile, the police were strict about enforcing the law which forbade ownership of guns by the local people.

This frustrating predicament continued until the military coup d'etat by General Idi Amin in 1971 brought a different armed force into the district. Amin's army took over the job of stopping the raiders, and, according to local informants, was much more brutally efficient. The army pursued the raiders with a vengeance, and recovered many of the stolen livestock, but rather than return these recaptured cattle to their rightful owners, the soldiers confiscated them and sold them to local cattle traders. Now the people of Karamoja were faced with both armed raiders and a thieving army.

Believing that their only recourse was self-help, in the early 1970s they began to fabricate homemade guns. They broke into the schools and stole metal furniture to get steel tubing for gun barrels. With these crude firearms and their traditional weapons, they began attacking isolated police posts, overwhelming the officers, and taking their guns. Now better armed, a small group of Karimojong men mounted an audacious and cleverly planned early morning attack on police headquarters in Nabilituk, a raid that netted them many more modern firearms.

Finally, in 1979, Amin's regime collapsed under the onslaught of the liberation troops invading from the south. As the government disintegrated, so did the army, and soldiers fled to the north and east. Along the way, they traded and sold their weapons, or sometimes lost them to local attackers. The Karamoja regional army barracks in Moroto were abandoned and the doors were virtually left open for looting. Almost immediately, local people broke into the armory and carried off rifles and ammunition by the donkey-load. Observers said the bundles of weapons looked like firewood and, indeed, these guns did become fuel for the firepower that was rapidly changing the social and ecological landscape in Karamoja.

The Karimojong now were quite well armed, and they began to use these weapons to mount cattle raids on neighboring districts, especially to the west and south. The victims of these raids complained bitterly to the new Obote-led government, and Milton Obote, a northerner himself and sympathetic to the complaints of the Teso, Lango, and Acholi people, and also concerned about a heavily armed and potentially rebellious populace in Karamoja, decided to use military counterforce. He sent police and militia units from these neighboring districts into Karamoja to pursue cattle raiders and disarm the Karimojong. In the armed clashes

that ensued, the Karimojong repeatedly defeated these outside forces and captured their weapons.

Within a few short years, Obote's errors and misdeeds led to his downfall a second time, and in 1985 the Okellos organized a coup within the army (the Acholis overthrowing the Langis) and against the Obote regime. Okellos' forces, however, were also undisciplined and within six months they fell to the invading National Resistance Army (NRA) led by Yoweri Museveni (Mutimbwa, 1992). During all of this political and military chaos at the center, the army barracks armory in Moroto was once again looted and the Karimojong obtained another large infusion of guns.

By this time, an internal and international trade in arms was well underway in Karamoja. Continuing militarization and armed conflict in southern Sudan, western Kenya, and southern Ethiopia had created a steady and lucrative trade in guns and ammunition across these borders into Karamoja. Indeed, this trade still continues, especially from southern Sudan into Dodoth in northern Karamoja. The price of a round of ammunition is determined by the distance from its source, and increases as it moves south in Karamoja.

Museveni's NRA was attempting to pacify the whole of Uganda, and within a few months it reached the borders of Karamoja. As it moved in, the army began to arrest gun-holders and confiscate their arms. Some observers report that when the NRA tried to disarm the Karimojong, things went awry. In some areas, the army did manage to take away many of the guns, but then the soldiers misbehaved, bullying people and looting stores, and generally convincing the Karimojong that their only protection from men with guns lay in keeping guns themselves. The resistance might have become quite violent, but before that could happen, the NRA was withdrawn, and sent westward to fight the more serious rebellion that had broken out in northern Uganda, leaving behind only a token force, and a still heavily armed Karamoja.

In 1989, a group of policy-makers and individuals deeply concerned about conditions in Karamoja held a conference to try to find solutions to the increasing violence and lack of security in the area. After lengthy discussions, a preliminary report from the conference participants detailed two options: (1) the army could re-enter Karamoja and forcibly disarm the local people, or (2) the people could keep their guns and the armed Karimojong warriors could be transformed into a local level force to police the use of guns. In the opinion of the conference participants, the first option would be met with violent resistance and thus would be extremely costly in terms of money, military effort, and human lives. The second option was resisted by politically powerful opponents in Kampala who would not accept a policy that provided government support to these armed and rebellious warriors, many of whom had committed criminal acts. Rather, the opponents insisted, these thieves and murderers should be arrested. The result of this effort at peacemaking was stalemate. No final report of the conference was ever completed, and the government did nothing.

The Formation of the Vigilantes

In 1992, as security conditions in Karamoja continued to deteriorate, the Moroto District Council decided to take matters into their own hands. They appointed Sam Abura Pirir as Secretary of Security for Moroto District (southern Karamoja) and charged him with organizing

a local police force recruited from among the armed warriors. Members of this local force, known as "vigilantes", were recruited according to two main criteria. First, you must own a gun (the local government was not going to provide weapons), and secondly, you must be recognized as a leader in your community. The criteria for recognized leadership were quite traditional, i.e., your opinions are listened to and carry great weight, you are a man, or the son of a man, wealthy in cattle, your bravery and marksmanship are well-known and admired (or feared), or your skills at divination are recognized and respected. A small force was initially formed and, as events would have it, almost immediately tested.

In Matheniko County, a well-known and respected local school headmaster was ambushed on the road and killed. A group of vigilantes from the area was quickly formed and began tracking the killers. It followed these fugitives to Namaalu in the far south of the district, then north to Nabilatuk, and finally back to Matheniko. In the course of their pursuit, the vigilantes arrested a sub-county chief who had helped the killers elude their pursuers, thus demonstrating their political muscle in law enforcement. Two of the killers managed to escape into Kenya, but the pursuers got word that a third one was hiding in a village just south of Moroto. Before dawn, the vigilantes surrounded the village, then kept everyone inside and began a systematic search. The fugitive's kinsman in the village had hidden him under the top of a granary that was removed and placed on the ground. It was a clever ruse and probably would have worked, but the man panicked, leapt out of his hiding place and began firing only to be shot and killed.

The vigilantes' determined and effective performance in this event was very impressive. As a result, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) agreed to support the vigilantes through contributions of blankets and food, and their commander was able to get shirts for his men as a kind of rudimentary uniform.

Sam Abura Pirir (1996) developed the initial vigilante force by recruiting ten men from each parish (a unit of a subcounty) for a total of 900 in Moroto District. He also chose a few women as intelligence gatherers: when they moved about they saw and heard things that might indicate illegal or non-peaceful activities, and men did not pay any attention to them. Abura Pirir decided that the top priority was to secure the roads. The army had not been able to accomplish this and its own vehicles, even when traveling in convoys, had come under fire. Private vehicles and convoys were at great risk of attack, and over the past decade many NGOs had withdrawn from Karamoja because of these attacks. So initially, the ten vigilantes in each parish were posted to guard the roads and, according to Abura Pirir, they were immediately effective. The roads became much safer.

Meanwhile, President Museveni was under continuing political pressure from districts bordering Karamoja to deal with the problem of armed Karimojong cattle raiders. When he finally visited the area, he was persuaded, albeit with misgivings, that the national government had to support the successful vigilante program that already had the backing of NGOs and the local government. To allay his skepticism, the President took three significant actions. First, he appointed Peter Lokeris, a trusted associate from Karamoja, as a special President's Representative on Security in Karamoja to oversee this volatile situation. Secondly, he appointed a new army commander for the Moroto division, a man from Karamoja who spoke the language and could relate to the local people. As a final and crucial step, Museveni insisted that the vigilante organization must come under the command and control of the army. Local

officials were in no position to argue with this demand. Although local government funds were used to pay the vigilantes' monthly stipend, now set at 10,000 Ugandan shillings per month (approximately US\$10), the army became the paymaster. The overall force was greatly expanded to 1,000 per county--5,000 in Moroto District (southern Karamoja) and 3,000 in Kotido District (northern Karamoja). The vigilantes were issued their own special uniforms and a hierarchically elaborated military command structure was established, with commanders at each geopolitical unit level, i.e., village, parish, sub-county, county, and district. Even the temporary cattle camps had vigilantes moving with the herds. According to Abura Pirir, the army did not retain the women vigilantes that he had recruited, because they did not fit the military conception of what a soldier is or does; the army only wanted people with guns, and "how can a woman have a gun?"

By early 1996, this new form of security did appear to be having a positive effect. In the village of Nabilatuk, for example, people were sitting outside their houses and shops long after dark, talking and drinking tea and beer, in a relaxed atmosphere of sociability they had not experienced for many years. They could walk from one homestead to another without fear of attack, they said, something that had not been possible until the vigilantes became active. Although still somewhat wary, many people attested to the increased safety they felt in traveling throughout the region. Reports of raiding and other forms of theft by violence dramatically decreased.

Under this new organization, one question immediately arises: are the vigilantes soldiers? They do receive some military training and some political education on peace and development from the army. When government officials need to go into an area where there is a high potential for violence in order to initiate security discussions with the local people, they will enter in an army vehicle, typically an armored personnel carrier (APC). Unlike a few years ago, the local people do not attack the APCs because they now are filled with vigilantes and elders, recognized traditional local leaders, not government soldiers from ethnic groups outside of Karamoja. In one particular situation, the vigilantes do work under the close supervision of the national army. Museveni's government promulgated a law forbidding the Karimojong to carry their weapons outside of Karamoja. When Karimojong herdsman bring their cattle to temporary cattle camps across the district borders into neighboring Teso and Acholi areas, vigilantes in these groups accompany them. Some of these vigilantes do bring their guns, but they report to the nearest police or army barracks where they sleep and train with those units and are available to participate in policing the prohibition on Karimojong having guns.

The district police force, also controlled by the district administration but an entity separate from the vigilantes, is being rebuilt with Karamoja secondary school graduate recruits who are receiving formal training at the national police academy. Some local officials say that the vigilantes are a kind of local arm of the district police, but how these two forces will be organizationally related, much less integrated, has yet to be addressed.

Keeping the Peace through Talking

Within traditional Karimojong society, important decisions for the group (one might call them policy decisions) are made through a process of discussion and debate by the adult

(initiated) men of the community or area. As noted earlier, in these discussions certain men are quite influential, especially those who are elders, who have a reputation for good judgment, who are wealthy in cattle (usually seen as an indication of good judgment), who have special powers of prediction or prophecy, or, in circumstances of conflict with an enemy, are known to be especially brave and militarily astute. Although changes that have occurred during the past two decades of turmoil have threatened to undermine this system of traditional authority and decision-making, these leadership traits are still recognized and the form of group decision-making is still potentially powerful. As local government leaders have tried to create peace in Karamoja, they have used this traditional political process to prevent outbreaks of large-scale conflict and escalating violence. I was fortunate enough to witness an example of this approach to peace-keeping.

In January 1996, serious trouble was brewing. For more than twenty years some Turkana herdsmen had lived in an area north of Mt. Moroto. Recently they had moved east and south of the mountain. They had made marriage and livestock alliances with their Karimojong "cousins" (primarily, the Matheniko) and lived in relative peace; indeed, some villages and even some cattle camps were a mixture of Turkana and Matheniko. Farther to the south, the Pian division of the Karimojong had developed similar, although much more recent, alliances with the Pakot people, some of whom lived in Kenya and some in Karamoja territory adjacent to the Pian. In Kenya, the Pakot and Turkana have an ambivalent relationship; sometimes they are allies, sometimes enemies. During the past decade in Karamoja, the Pakot have been known to join the Pian in large raids against other groups. Now, the Pakot and Pian were complaining bitterly about what they claimed was a new and hostile military alliance of the Turkana and Matheniko, and threatening to take what they portrayed as preemptive action against these enemies.

Word of these complaints and the impending conflict reached Kampala and the central government made a decision that the Turkana must be forced back to the north side of Mt. Moroto. On orders from Kampala, the army commander in Moroto went out to the Matheniko/Turkana villages and told the Turkana that they had to pack up and leave in three days. The commander, who harbored his own grudges against the Turkana, then informed the Pakot and Pian of his actions, and thus these two groups expected the Turkana to be forced out of their current location.

In an effort to defuse this situation, a group of government officials, lead by Hon. David Pulkol, Member of Parliament for Moroto District and then Minister of State for Karamoja Affairs, and including Michael Lokawua, then Chairman of the Moroto District Council, Peter Lokeris, Sam Abura Pirir, and the Moroto army commander, traveled to distant villages and cattle camps to talk, often late into the night, with local leaders, trying to ascertain the factual basis for this conflict and the potential for violence. Among the Turkana, they talked with a particularly powerful and influential man named Lowakaabong, who told them that the Matheniko/Turkana elders had come to an agreement with Pakot elders just six or seven days earlier on how to share grazing and water resources in a particularly desirable and contested area known as Ochorichoi. (Because of the continuous conflict over this choice area, all settlements in the area had been abandoned for more than three decades.) When these officials talked with Pakot leaders the following night, they discovered that there had been no actual

incidents of raiding or trouble with the Turkana. In other words, the whole "problem" appeared to be a fabrication.

But the Moroto army commander refused to rescind his order to the Turkana to move their settlements unless ordered to do so by his superior commanding officer. So Peter Lokeris went to Kampala to consult with the President's office and to Mbale to convince the Divisional Army Commander to attend a peace meeting the following Saturday. Word was then sent out to the contending parties to bring their supporters to a large meeting on Saturday at Ochorichoi to air their grievances.

On the way to the meeting that Saturday morning, we encountered a group of Matheniko herdsmen, all heavily armed and tense with anger and apprehension, who said they were not going to the meeting. They had been warned by an arms trader who had just been in Pakot villages that the Pian and Pakot were planning to steal their cattle while they were off attending the meeting. The trader also said that the Pakot were going to attack and disrupt the meeting with gunfire. As we left the main road and headed for Ochorichoi, the government officials all rode in one vehicle discussing what their strategy should be. When we arrived at the site, hundreds of men were already there, sitting in their various ethnic groups, all armed. Many vigilantes were present, also sitting with their respective tribal groups. The army had unobtrusively deployed men all around the far perimeter of the area. The men in these ethnic groupings were very quiet, tense and wary.

The meeting finally got underway with an opening speech by Lokeris who warned that the patience of the national government was not inexhaustible and the army could be used to enforce peacekeeping. Then the first round of speakers, two from each group, began to present their arguments and rebuttals. The Pakot led off with a vitriolic attack by a young man who accused the Turkana of every kind of treachery and atrocity, including burying people alive. In one dramatic gesture, he pointed to Lowakaabong and in a voice strained with anger called him a thief. A second Pakot speaker, although older and less histrionic, also claimed that the Turkana were the core of the problem, that the Matheniko had been harboring these criminals, and that they must be sent packing back to Kenya. Two subsequent Pian speakers made essentially the same argument. Then the Matheniko were given a chance to respond to these accusations. They pointed out that the Pakot are also from Kenya and so did not have any grounds for criticizing the Turkana as outsiders. Indeed, on the Kenya side of the border they were living with the Turkana and making alliances with them, just as the Matheniko had done. When Lowakaabong was allowed to defend himself and to speak for the Turkana, he challenged his accusers, especially the Pakot, to name one incident where his group of Turkana had stolen from them. In further rebuttal, he cited several incidents in which Turkana stock were stolen and he had counselled his people against retaliation. He told how he had led his people into Kenya to recover from Turkana raiders cattle they had stolen from the Karimojong, and had even made up the difference out of his own stock. The Pakot fears were unfounded, he said, and he noted their recent grazing rights agreement.

As the afternoon wore on, the speakers were all more senior men, elders and vigilante commanders, and the speeches took on a more conciliatory tone, with many statements extolling the benefits of peace. As the meeting broke up, men from the different ethnic groups

were talking with one another and shaking hands. The Divisional Army Commander was convinced that violence had been averted and rescinded the order against the Turkana.

In discussions after the meeting several of the Karamoja government officials said they believed that the Pian and Pakot had deliberately fomented this conflict hoping to generate hostility toward the Turkana and force them to move their herds and settlements. Because the Matheniko and Turkana livestock and homesteads had become so intermingled over the years, the Matheniko would have to accompany the Turkana. Then, while they were on the move and in their weakest position, the Pian and Pakot would attack. They came to the meeting with tempers flaring, expecting the government to evict the Turkana. Thus, at the beginning of the meeting there was enormous tension and a real possibility of violence, but the conduct and outcome of the meeting had undermined their position and destroyed their strategy.

Restoring Traditional Authority

At the close of the meeting the local governmental leaders had exhorted the men to establish in their villages local councils of leaders who would meet frequently to keep track of any trouble that might be brewing and take measures to keep things from escalating to violence. For example, if any theft of livestock had occurred they could go to the ones who had stolen and force them to return the animals or make restitution. These local leaders would be the equivalent of, and in many cases would be, the traditional elders.

As the armed violence of the past two decades escalated, the control that the elders had traditionally exercised over the young men was challenged. Rich men with guns formed small armies of young headstrong warriors who were dispossessed and willing to break the cultural rules and restraints against indiscriminate raiding and killing. Those elders who also were dispossessed in the chaos of raiding, drought, and famine could no longer command respect or exercise any control over these young men. The threat of a total breakdown of traditional law and order was one of the most serious consequences of the transformation of weaponry in these warrior societies.

Fortunately, this system of social control by the elders was not completely destroyed. The practice of initiation into the age grade system has continued. Indeed, many of the modern educated men who are government officials told me they had been initiated. The cultural principle and practice of respecting those who are older has deep roots and a strong rationale in this pastoral political economy. Some of the elders have managed to maintain their status, although they have adapted to the new reality of modern firearms being widely distributed. They also are armed, have maintained their herds, often through some raiding, and have networks of younger men they can call upon for support. Nonetheless, they still are committed to the traditional forms of decision-making and they have grown weary of the violence and destruction. It is from the ranks of these elders and their networks that many of the vigilantes have come, and it is to these elders that the modern governmental leaders are now turning to create peace through the restoration of traditional forms of culturally legitimate social and political authority.

It may seem ironic that at the end of a century of attempts to isolate, then to control and change Karamoja the value of the elders is finally being recognized. The British colonial

administration was convinced that the elders were an impediment to progress and civilization, and so it appointed chiefs (Barber, 1968). When the chiefs proved ineffectual, the colonial administration blamed the elders and attempted to destroy their political power by outlawing initiation ceremonies, hoping to undermine the continuity of the age grade system. The plan might have worked, but fortunately, when Ugandan independence occurred, this edict was rescinded and the age grade system was immediately revived (Dyson-Hudson, 1966). Still, in the years since independence a series of Ugandan governments has viewed Karamoja as dangerously backward and irrationally resistant to change, and the elders have been mocked and disregarded, as outsiders appointed by Kampala have come into Karamoja to administer a series of unsuccessful development plans (Quam, 1978) or to impose a militarized order. More recently, Karamoja has produced a few leaders who have risen to some political prominence at the national level. In June 1996, David Pulkol was re-elected to Parliament (and has since been appointed to the powerful post of Director of the External Security Organization), Michael Lokawua was newly elected to Parliament, Peter Lokeris was appointed Minister of State for Karamoja Affairs, and Omwony-Ojok continued to serve as the Director of the National AIDS Commission. These modern men, along with their allies in the District Administration, have become convinced that the traditional forms of social control are the best hope for creating peace and community development in the places they call home.

Will this approach work? Will it be given a chance to work? The peace in Karamoja is not perfect and it is fragile. In November, 1996, *The Monitor* newspaper in Kampala carried four stories about relatively small-scale incidents of cattle raiding and armed attacks in Karamoja (Sylvester, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1996d). Significantly, the stories also included accounts of vigorous response by vigilantes and other security officers. Another serious drought could set off a series of conflicts over grazing and water which might quickly escalate into large-scale armed violence. In the past, when a family lost much of its livestock it could rebuild its wealth through traditional practices of borrowing and skillful herd management. The recent levels of impoverishment may require new strategies of subsistence and recovery, but the opportunities for agriculture and wage labor are severely limited in Karamoja, especially after the recent economic and infrastructural decline (Okudi, 1992). Unless those who are impoverished, especially the young men, can find a lawful means of subsistence, they will continue to be a reserve army of potential recruits for renewed raiding and banditry.

The militarization of the vigilantes could create some dissonance with traditional authority. The effectiveness of the vigilantes is based on their legitimacy as indigenous, grass-roots leaders whose authority is grounded in their conformity to traditional values. They are local leaders who guard their community areas, although some ambiguity exists regarding their status because they fall under the command of the army and are organized in a military-style chain of command structure. What would happen, for example, if a senior commander gave a local vigilante an order that contradicted the authoritative voice of the local elders? Where would the vigilante's allegiance lie? The vigilantes have received pay increases, full uniforms, and even some additional payments in kind. They also are receiving additional military training. Where do their long-range interests lie? If they begin to be seen as another arm of the national army, will the people continue to trust and obey them?

On the other hand, the national government has little choice but to pursue the current policy of indigenous peace-keeping in Karamoja. With rebellion on the Sudan border and warfare to the west and south in Zaire and Rwanda (French, 1996; UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs, 1996), it cannot take on significant military operations in the northeast. As has been the case so often in the past, Karamoja is viewed as an exceptional problem case in national development. This time the people of Karamoja may have a chance to demonstrate the effectiveness of their traditional system of political authority in keeping the peace in an armed society.

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