



Original Article

Pastoralism and the Struggle for Survival in Laikipia

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This article is about the unceasing ethnic conflicts in Laikipia West constituency, Laikipia county. The interethnic conflict has continued to be witnessed between Kenya and its neighbouring countries since the colonial era to date in Kenya, mainly in the arid and semiarid areas amongst pastoral communities. Laikipia West constituency has been experiencing perennial conflicts that have been worsening over time. The conflicts have often led to the disruption of social and economic activities and people migrating from their residential areas in search of safer places to settle in. Ethnic conflicts in the constituency can be traced back to 1895 when the white settlers began establishing their homes in Laikipia county. Prior to British colonial rule, the area in Laikipia was under pastoralism by the Maasai and Samburu communities. With the coming of the colonialists, most of the lands were seized and the pastoral communities living in these areas were displaced. Some immigrants resulted in establishing ranches, while other immigrants resulted in irrigation systems leading to the horticultural boom in Laikipia in the 1980s. The first part of this article will seek to unearth the root causes of inter-ethnic conflict in Laikipia, while the effects of the perennial conflicts are examined in the later part. This study employed the conflict theory by Marx, which purports that the existence of different social classes is the continuous source of inevitable conflict and change in the social structure occurring through political upheavals affecting class composition.

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INTRODUCTION

Laikipia West constituency is a multi-ethnic area that comprises pastoralist communities such as the Maasai and Samburu who were the earliest inhabitants of the area.¹ Until about 1550, the Yaaku and Ndigiri are thought to have previously lived in Laikipia practising hunting and gathering. Later another group, the Wardeia Darya then migrated from present-day Ethiopia to Laikipia trading and intermarrying with both the Yaaku and Digiri communities. The Yaaku adopted the Wardei Darya Cushitic language, which is still spoken by a few people to date.²

In 1790 the Maa-speaking communities arrived displacing the Warya and going on to dominate the region. The Maasai went on practising pastoralism in the vast lands till their displacement by the whites. Sir Eliot believed that the whites had a Divine calling to pacify Africans and since the Maasai were irredeemable, the only solution was to eliminate them.³ With several agreements, the last one being the 1911 agreement more lands were alienated from the white settlers creating what later came to be known as the white highlands. The British government largely encouraged the white to settle in Kenya so as to create a viable economy that served British interests. The people from central Kenya mainly migrated to Laikipia as squatters to work for the white settlers.⁴

Migrating to Laikipia was viewed as a better option since the whites residing in Laikipia gave them some land to settle in as they worked on their farms. Sospeter asserts that after independence, Kikuyus from central Kenya migrated to Laikipia after much of the land use changed from ranching to small-scale mixed farming.⁵ Most of the lands were bought by land-buying companies and then subdivided for sale. This brought with it an influx of immigrants, mainly from central Kenya. Wanjiku, an 80-year-old widow recalled how they had migrated to Laikipia after they had bought a piece of land from a land-buying company.⁶ Other communities such as the Samburu often migrate to Laikipia during the dry seasons in search of pastures for their livestock.

CONFLICTS IN LAIKIPIA

Okoth and Ogot postulated that Kenya had had her share of conflicts involving various ethnic groups or clans. The prevailing understanding of inter-ethnic conflict in Kenya is that these conflicts stem from incompatibility between the conflicting parties inspired by ethno-nationalism. The duos assert that ethno-nationalism is a concept that refers to particular communities expressing themselves socially, economically, and politically to the disadvantage of others who compete for similar

¹ Mkutu, K.A., *Guns and Governance in the Rift Valley: Pastoralist Conflicts and Small Arms*. (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers, 2008), p.13

² A Natural History Guide. A publication of the Laikipia Wildlife forum.

³ Ngunjiri, J., Kiereini, D., and Mwenda, G., *Destination Laikipia, Celebrating 100 years of Nanyuki town*, (Awesome Concepts LTD, 2020) P.8

⁴ Kiteme, B and Linger, *Dimensions of global change in African mountainous: The example of Mount Kenya in International Human Dimensions programme on Global Environmental Change Mountainous*, 2008, pp.18-22.

⁵ Oral Interview, Sospeter, 7th December 2020

⁶ Oral Interview, Wanjiku, 80 years old, 31st November 2020

opportunities.⁷ Okoth and Ogot's sentiments have been echoed not to be any different from what has been happening in Laikipia by Murango, a 48-year-old farmer who terms the conflict in Laikipia as being a struggle for limited economic resources by the majority over the minority.⁸

Causes of Conflict

Stavenhagen argues that conflict is a state of disharmony where state parties compete for perceived or real interests out of unmet needs. According to him, conflict can be considered ethnic when it involves organized political movements, mass unrest, separatist action and civil wars with opposing lines drawn along ethnic motives.⁹ Moreover, inter-ethnic conflict involves distinct plural societies living in a certain geographical area, while intra-ethnic conflicts involve internal feuds within a singular ethnic identity. Ethnic conflicts in Laikipia's west constituency can be traced back to 1895 when the white settlers began establishing their homes in Laikipia. Welsman asserts that prior to British colonization, the Laikipia area was under pastoralism by the Samburu. With the coming of the colonialists, however, most of the lands were seized and the pastoral communities were displaced from their areas.¹⁰ Muthee, a 94-year-old farmer currently staying in Kinamba, recalled the peaceful times when he used to work for the white men as a tractor driver in Kamwenje. According to him, it was until the time when the pastoralists began to fight back to reclaim their lost lands that subsequently resulted in the mass exodus of people from the area to safer places.¹¹ He further argued that land is the main

issue of contention between the whites and the indigenous people due to the growing population.

On his part, Kiteme posits that the population growth between 1962 and 1997 in Laikipia was considerable which saw an annual growth rate of 4.7 percent as opposed to the national average of 3.3 percent.¹² Additionally, Njuguna, a boda boda operator explained that he had lost track of the number of times that he and his mates had to sleep in the farms with their livestock so as to protect them from theft. He explained that the pastoral communities want to take over their lands and hence won't stop raiding their homes so that they can migrate from these areas.¹³ In total, there are 43 registered ranches in Laikipia all of which occupy an area of more than 10,000 acres.¹⁴ The huge ranches result in pastoral communities in Laikipia not having enough grazing lands hence strained land use. In recent times, pastoralists have tried to occupy ranches by force so as to have enough grazing grounds. They have been accusing the ranch owners of using their lands to enrich themselves at their expense since they no longer offer community sponsorship to schools and hospitals like they used to. Mwangi who was working as a watchman in one of the local schools explained that in the past, the ranch owners used to support the hospitals and schools by paying school fees for the needy students which no longer happens. This has increased the tension between the ranch owners and the locals who view the owners as benefiting from their land to their disadvantage.¹⁵ Campbell further asserts that since then there has been a prevalence of conflict

⁷ Okoth, P.G and Ogot, B.A (eds) Conflict in Contemporary Africa (Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation,2000), pp.29-38.

⁸ Oral interview, Murango, 48-year-old farmer, 1st December 2020

⁹ Stavenhagen, R, The Ethnic question: rhetorical issues. Dubrovnik: June 3-6,1991

¹⁰ Republic of Kenya, Laikipia West District Development plan 2008-2012(Nairobi: Government Printer,2009), pp1-55.

¹¹ Oral Interview, Muthee, 5th December 2020

¹² Kiteme, B and Linegar, H., Dimensions of Global Change in African Mountains: The example of Mt Kenya in international human dimensions programme on global environmental change mountainous,2008, pp18-22

¹³ Oral Interview, Njuguna, 2nd December 2020

¹⁴ Laikipia County, First County Development Integrated Development Plan, 2013-2017

¹⁵ Oral interview, Mwangi, 22nd December 2020

between farmers, pastoralists, large-scale ranchers, and wildlife.¹⁶

Figure 1: The Kukki Galmann's ranch



Source: Africanspicesafaris.com

The surrounding terrain also makes it difficult for the army to combat cattle rustling. Laikipia West constituency is located in the semiarid region of the former Rift Valley province. The county is located on the Laikipia plateau, which is 9,462 km wide.¹⁷ Despite the constituency being located on the plains, it borders Baringo county on one side and is widely separated by hilly and rocky terrain. The hilly and rocky terrain act as proper hideouts for the cattle rustlers and makes it difficult for the army to pursue the cattle rustlers, who are well conversant with the

terrain once an attack happens. The steep, rocky terrain with bushes and gorges, which act as proper hideouts for cattle rustling, makes it so difficult to stop the current insecurities. Mweshi, a local businessman, narrates how painful it was to watch his animals being driven away by the rustlers who threatened to finish him if he dared to alert his neighbours. He asserted that milk is their gold because purchasing it from the few farmers who own the remaining animals in the neighbourhoods has proved to be expensive.¹⁸

¹⁶ Campbell, I and Craig, R and Crawford, A., Climate Change and Conflict. Lessons from community conservancies in Northern Kenya (*Conservation Development Centre, International Institute for sustainable Development and safeword, 2009*), p.4.

¹⁷ Laikipia County, First County Development Integrated Development Plan, 2013-2017

¹⁸ Oral interview, mweshi local businessman, 8th December 2020

Figure 2: A view of the border terrain that separates Laikipia West Constituency on one side and Baringo County with Lake Baringo in the background



Source: Photograph taken by the author.

Yattani focuses on the availability of weapons that have evolved from traditional to modern weapons as one of the major causes of conflict between the Gabra and the Dassanetch.¹⁹ The situation is no different from the happenings in the Laikipia West constituency. Sospeter, a teacher at a local secondary school, narrates that Pokots often migrate from the neighbouring Baringo county in search of pastures for their livestock. During these expeditions, they often carry crude weapons such as guns which they use to silence the local residents

once they show signs of resistance.²⁰ Mwamba, a farmer in the area, recounted when armed raiders drove their animals in hundreds on his farm eating up all his crops. He recounts having made huge losses that year.²¹ Despite efforts being made by the government to conduct disarmament exercises, it has proved to be futile. The accessibility of guns from Uganda through the porous borders has hampered the efforts to fully disarm the pastoral communities; moreover, throughout the years, they have mastered the art of making homemade guns.²²

¹⁹ Yattani, I, D., inter-ethnic conflict between Gabra and Dassaneth, 1960-2011

M.A Diss. Kenyatta University, (2015) pp.11-14

²⁰ Oral Interview, Sospeter a local secondary school teacher, 12th December 2020

²¹ Oral Interview, Mwamba a local farmer, 15th December 2020

²² Mohamud, M. and Rutu, P., Closed to Progress: An Assessment of the socio-economic Impact of Conflict of Pastoral Economies in Kenya and Uganda. (Nairobi: Practical Action, 2005), pp 32-37

Figure 3: Pastoral communities carrying ammunition at the Laikipia, Baringo border

Source: Photo obtained from Karanja, a police officer at the Laikipia-Baringo border.

Politics is another major issue that often leads to conflicts in the Laikipia West constituency. Murphy asserts that inter-ethnic conflict in Kenya is normally organized and sponsored by the government.²³ Korir, a soldier operating at the border post, recounts that there is a tendency for ethnic conflicts to increase when the electioneering period nears. He regards this as the common ideology that “Kikuyu land is in central and hence should go back there”.²⁴ Abong, a 98-year-old local farmer, explains the conflict in Laikipia as having been exacerbated due to the formation of the Kamatusa group formed to counter Gema of Kenyatta’s time. Kamatusa group was formed to bring together all pastoralist communities so as to counter the growing Kikuyu numbers. The

Kamatusa group bought weapons and sought financial aid to cover up for their lack of strength. The Gema and Kamatusa were not able to unite due to their ideological differences and this has led to constant grudges.²⁵ Koswony explains that the tension has been increasing due to political instigations that divide the people of the rift and those from the central.²⁶ Kigano concurs with Koswony’s sentiments that the pastoral communities often fought the Kikuyus living in Laikipia so as to force them to migrate from this area and hence the area being predominantly occupied by the Rift Valley communities.

²³ Murphy, C, *Ethnic relations in Kenya* (Nairobi: Oxford press 2003), p.23

²⁴ Oral Interview, Korir a soldier operating at the border post, 13 th December 2020

²⁵ Oral Interview, Abong 98-year-old farmer, 11th December 2020

²⁶ Oral interview, Koswony 28-year-old civil servant, 12th December 2020

Effects of Conflicts in Laikipia West Constituency

Kenyans have a strong sense of their ethnic identity. Mamdami argues that while some conflicts are fueled by socio-economic and political competitions, others have risen due to deep-rooted ethnicity.²⁷ Perennial ethnic clashes in Laikipia West have often been accorded to people belonging to different ethnic groups that are in constant rivalry. Apart from the strong sense of ethnic identity, Political tensions, inadequate pastures, and jeopardized political systems, among other issues, have also been contributory factors to the clashes. Tsebelis asserts that ethnic conflicts within a country affect its neighbours and pose a great threat to both regional and global security and emerge as a key concern for policymakers.²⁸ The perennial conflicts being experienced have often disabled the livelihoods of the people of Laikipia greatly. The

political, economic, and social lives of the people have greatly changed. Lokudo, a 50-year-old man living with a disability, emotionally narrated how he had to leave his ancestral land handed over to him by his parents due to frequent insecurity issues. He now rents a one-roomed house in a nearby shopping Centre where he lives with his son.²⁹ Another former resident of Matwiku Kiptanui emotionally recounted to be living in abject poverty after being forcefully evacuated from his home. He chose to leave his retirement home and everything he had acquired over the years due to frequent attacks. He emotionally recounted having wasted his years building a future that never was.³⁰ In the worst war-stricken areas like Kamwenje, most of the farms and homes have been long deserted and overgrown with grass. The once-called homes are slowly fading off with leaking roofs, and falling walls now home to rodents and snakes.

Figure 4: Photographs of some of the vacated homes due to the perennial clashes



Source: Photograph taken by the author.

²⁷ Mamdami, M, *Saviors and Survivors*. (New York: Pantheon Books and Colophon,2009),p27

²⁸ Tsebelis, G., *How Political Institutions Work*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), p.46

²⁹ Oral Interview, Lokudo year old farmer, 17th December 2020

³⁰ Oral Interview, Kiptanui, year old former civil servant, 18th December 2020

Underdevelopment is also a key factor evident in most of the centres in the Laikipia West constituency. Despite there being electricity in most centres, people have fled from these areas to safer grounds to avert the insecurity status of these areas. Kihika, a former resident of Kamwenje, explained how the migratory system began with the area residents first moving their livestock which was highly targeted by pastoral communities who believed that all cattle were created to be owned by them from these areas to safer grounds or their relatives' places who were in more habitable grounds. He further asserts that as the insecurity issues grew thicker, people started migrating too, mostly to safer centres where they now rent houses.³¹ The roads are impassible and social amenities are not easily accessible. Kibugi, a former resident of Maua, explained that their worst fears were falling sick during the wee hours because the nearest dispensary was over a kilometre away and with poor roads most people ended up dying before reaching the hospitals.³² Some of the centres, especially those at the border, resemble ghost towns. They are a shadow of what they used to be.

Death of people has also resulted from the frequent ethnic clashes in the Laikipia West constituency. Apart from death, other victims have ended up losing some of their body organs and others having to live with permanent scars from the conflicts. Wanjeri, a civil servant, emotionally recounted how she lost her immediate family members during the recent clashes. She recounted how they were shot by the heavily armed bandits when they came out to confront them as they drove their animals away at night. She has since relocated from her former homestead, but the bullet wound in her chest is a constant reminder of the dark past she has been through.³³ Wanjeri's words were echoed by Kinyua

who asserted that being outside your home after 7:30 pm was like committing suicide.³⁴ Ethnic clashes in Laikipia West have led to the death of many, the most memorable experience being the Ol Moran clashes of 1998 and the 2016 clashes, whereby policemen were deployed to quell ethnic clashes and were intercepted and brutally murdered by armed gunmen. What followed was the government trying to carry out disarmament exercises, which according to the residents, was a short-lived exercise whose results were visible for only a few weeks.

Literacy levels have also been greatly jeopardized. Absenteeism in schools has become a norm. Kimaiyo, a 30-year-old teacher at a local school, explains that the clashes have greatly affected the performance of students, especially those in day schools. At times students have been forced to miss school as they take care of their relatives hurt during the clashes and those who come to have to deal with the psychological tortures and emotional insecurities which act as a hindrance to their academic excellence.³⁵ Migratory systems from war-affected regions have also disrupted learning activities in schools. At times especially when there are heightened security issues learning institutions have had to be shut down hence learning activities being disrupted.

CONCLUSION

Laikipia West constituency has continued to witness confrontations among the pastoralist communities, ranch owners and farmers on the other side. This has led to farmers migrating from their conflict-inflicted residential areas leaving the land which has since been taken over by Adhoc land owners. Underdevelopment has also been a feature of the

³¹ Oral Interview, Kihika 40-year-old photographer, 19th December 2020

³² Oral Interview, Kibugi, 3-year-old Photographer, 20th December 2020

³³ Oral Interview, Wanjeri teacher a local school, 21st December 2020

³⁴ Oral Interview, Kinyua, 30 year old boda boda operator, 23rd December 2020

³⁵ Oral Interview, Kimaiyo, 35-year-old civil servant, 24th December 2020

affected centres, which has resulted in them looking like ghost centres. Deaths, displacement of people and underdevelopment have been key features of conflict. To some sections of the town's residents, complete disarmament is the ultimate solution to the struggles of the residents while to some sending the whites out of Laikipia and the lands being given back to the locals for their own use will ease the tensions of the people of Laikipia that has existed for decades.

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