

Ethnic conflicts in North-West Kenya

Pokot-Turkana Raiding 1969–1984*

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Abstract. Interethnic conflicts abound in the dryland areas of Eastern Africa. Violence between different pastoral groups causes widespread economic disruption. The conflict between the pastoral Pokot and Turkana of North-West Kenya, lasting from 1969 to 1984, is described. The focus of the paper is to look for causes of violence: the competition for scarce resources, the organisation of men in age-sets and the norms and values of warriorhood are discussed. The militarization of East Africa and the easy access to modern weapons due to widespread illegal trade with guns is singled out as an important factor for the escalation of interethnic conflict. A view from the actor's perspective then opens up new prospects for analysis: Pokot men invest time and capital in raiding, because they want to achieve certain goals in life.

Introduction

Watching the news from Eastern Africa one easily gets the impression that countries like Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia are about to fall apart. Government authority is decreasing all over the Horn of Africa due to internal instability. The widespread insecurity causes large-scale migration of citizens away from the war-torn homelands resulting in economic stagnation and decline. Not only rebel armies are shaking government authority, but also messianic movements, organized groups of bandits and traditional warriors fighting with modern weapons.

For several years the semi-arid northern parts of Kenya were torn by secessionist movements (the Pan-Somali shifta movement) and intertribal warfare. All ethnic groups in the north had access to modern weapons from the early 70's onwards, the guns mainly coming from Somalia, Sudan or Uganda. A closer look at the guns used by tribal warriors gives insight into 50 years of European and American weapons' production. From First World War guns with bayonets up to the most modern automatic guns (Kalashnikov, G3) – anything may be found. Ethnic groups living next to war-torn areas like Southern Sudan or Eastern Uganda have better access to modern weapons than those groups living further inland. Relations between the central government and the pastoral nomadic groups of the north have been strained for years (Schlee 1984). Decisions on world system level influence the flow of weapons through East Africa considerably. The pastoral Pokot of Baringo District were engaged in inter-tribe

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