

Food Insecurity in Turkana District, Kenya: A Focus on the Impact of Colonial Rule

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Abstract: *This paper examines the contribution of colonial rule to food insecurity among Turkana pastoralists living in the Turkana District in the arid zone of north-western Kenya. It is argued that food insecurity in Turkana began during the colonial period. For instance, during that period, the aim was to pacify Turkana pastoralists and to ensure peace and order. This tendency had several implications. It tended to present the Turkana people as an unreliable people prone to violence and, hence, to propagate depastoralisation. Of particular importance were negative colonial policies in relation to land. The policy emphasized on drawing of political boundaries and creation of block grazing schemes. Borders were fixed, and access to key resources were curtailed with little regard to seasonal variation and the needs of the people for pasture. The policy also placed the integral Turkana tribal land area under more than one political entity, which conflicted with indigenous resource use strategies. This meant that within the new fixed tribal boundaries, the environment was placed under more severe pressure. These measures greatly affected the transhumant patterns already mastered by the Turkana pastoralists from their long experience with ecological hardships. The border restriction also destroyed the lubricating social rubric traditionally obtained through trade and intermarriages with the neighbouring tribes. Levels of conflicts over available resources increased hence affected the resilience of pastoral systems, thus rendering pastoralists more vulnerable to environmental hazards such as drought.*

Key words: *Turkana, Food insecurity, colonial rule*

1. Introduction

The predicament in which Turkana people find themselves during food insecurity is as a result of accumulated impacts of various historical factors that substantially weakened their asset base. It is argued that to properly understand how Turkana people respond to food crises, it is imperative to appreciate that given the hostile nature of the Turkana environment, there are many factors other than drought that are responsible for food shortages. For instance, a closer look at the history of food

insecurity in Turkana over the past century shows that climate change or drought are not solely responsible for recurrent famines, and have not lead to the decreasing resilience of the Turkana pastoral system (Dyson-Hudson 1972). As Lamphear (1972:13) has noted “to study a nomadic society such as the Turkana, it is imperative to deal with a wide range of variables”. Oba (1992), on the other hand, has strongly indicated that for a proper understanding of all the factors that impact negatively on the livelihood of the Turkana people, an analysis should be made of the historical past.

This paper argues that it may not be possible to adequately understand the nature of the contemporary livelihood responses in the Turkana District without knowledge (however imperfect) of what has gone before. The historical discussion also provides an opportunity to understand the emergence and relevance of different adaptive strategies as used by local people overtime. Recent studies shed light on the concepts of livelihood ‘trajectories’, ‘styles’, and ‘pathways’ which emphasize the consideration of the historical background of the actor(s) (De Haan and Zoomers 2005).

Furthermore, the argument advanced in this paper is that the stage for food shortages within the Turkana region was set many decades ago. Oba (1992) contends that the root cause of the food insecurity problems among the Turkana people of today can be traced to the disruptive and inimical policies of the colonial government. He argues that where policies have been applied, they have tended to be against the interest of the Turkana people. Lamphear (1992) emphasizes that the negative policies towards the Turkana people started with the colonial regime. A Turkana diviner called Lokorijam had a prophetic dream in 1875 about colonial infiltration. He is quoted: “I have seen a great vulture, coming from the sky, and scooping up the land of the Turkana in its talons” (Lamphear 1992: 48). Lamphear (1992: 48) further points out that “it is evident that a colonizing power who would wish to bring civilization [to the Turkana] will be obliged to fight them, to repress them or destroy them”. For instance, the British colonial administration, in their attempts to pacify the Turkana at the beginning of the 20th century, caused profound disruption. The Turkana lost a lot in

terms of people and livestock. Abuse of commonly held pastoral resources was also experienced during this period. The British administration imposed their authority by drawing ethnic and national boundaries, and created grazing blocks that restricted cattle movements. Thus, pastoralism was subordinated as a primitive mode of production and efforts were made to discourage it. These policies seriously weakened and disrupted the Turkana peoples' indigenous production system, contributed to their economic and political marginalization, and left them more vulnerable to periodic droughts and famine.

2. Impact of colonial administration on pastoral communities in Sub-Saharan Africa

During the advent of colonialism in Sub-Saharan Africa, pastoralists were considered to be born hostile, aloof and unreceptive (Baxter and Hogg 1990; Omosa 2003; Republic of Kenya 1992). The colonial administrators saw pastoralism as an undesirable form of land use and wanted to bring pastoralists within the orbit of the state as obedient taxpayers. The colonial policies also aimed at pacification of pastoralists. For example, in East Africa, the colonial administration denied the power and legitimacy of existing pastoral institutions. This was done through a reduction in livestock numbers, importing new breeds and providing permanent reserves. The objective was to establish meat producing centers. These intervention policies had negative effects on pastoralists' livelihoods, as improved animal health resulted in an increase in livestock that led to the overuse of common resources such as water. The provision of permanent watering points changed former migratory patterns, leading to large concentrations of livestock in areas that were previously not used for dry season grazing (Umar 1994).

The colonial governments also viewed Sub-Saharan African pastoralists as an obstacle to development (Hendrickson, Armon, and Mearns 1998). They imposed boundaries in pastoral areas and this accelerated hostility to local societies, and constrained their existing interactions and networks. The colonial policies also favoured sedentary agriculture and ranching strategy. This policy of taking land from pastoralists appeared to have seriously undermined the pastoral economy. For example, in West Africa, the colonial policies were aimed at the powerful pastoral societies of the Sahara and the Sahel. The long conflict between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary agriculturalists was resolved in favour of the cultivators. In Niger, the colonial regime from 1930 to 1950 aimed at developing groundnut cultivation for the market. This led to expansion of cultivated areas that

compressed pasture in pastoral lands (Sutter 1982). Tanzania under German colonialism evicted the Maasai from rich grazing land around the base of Mount Kilimanjaro and opened the areas for white settlers and indigenous farmers. Cultivation was extended to the pastoral areas. For instance, in 1980s the Tanzanian Government, with assistance from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) sponsored a large wheat cultivation project around mount Hanang, displacing Barabaig herders from 10,000 hectares of their land. This led to the degradation of common pastoral resources as Barabaig pastoralists could no longer practice their complex system of land use that involves movement (Lane 1996).

In Somalia, the colonial government took control of the livestock sector, limiting pastoralists' access to pastures and watering points. In Ethiopia's Awash River basin, home to pastoral communities, land was taken over in the 1950s and converted for irrigated agricultural production. The colonial policies on development of the Awash basin led to eviction of pastoralists from their land to give way for the establishment of large state farms to produce cotton and sugarcane. The shrinkage of grazing areas meant a decline of the pasture quality, water resources, and productive and reproductive capacity of domestic herds. Circumscribing grazing lands which offered greatest strategic value for subsistence also meant a destruction of basic pre-requisites for pastoral existence (Flood 1976).

In Sudan, the state gave priority to large public and private schemes based on political influence at the expense of pastoralists and other small-scale land users. The Sudanese government designed and implemented programmes to settle nomads and thus exposed them to urban centres, where they could be involved in the exchange market. By this policy, nomads were forced to change their livestock keeping from sheer subsistence to exchange mode of production (Babiker 2007). As a result, nomads became more vulnerable to the dictates of the market environment.

Similarly, in Kenya, colonial intrusion cut Maasai land in half with an international boundary between British Kenya and German Tanganyika in 1885. Treaties in 1904 and 1911 allowed the British to push the Kenyan Maasai south of the Mombasa-Uganda railroad (which passes through Nairobi) into a single reserve in southern Kenya later administered as Kajiado and Narok districts. The Maasai lost their prime water and grazing lands for European ranches, particularly near Nairobi around the Ngong Hills and Lakes Naivasha and Nakuru. The Maasai were also excluded from 60 percent of their dry season pastures

and drought reserves highlands of Laikipia (Spear and Waller, 1993).

3. History of Negative Colonial Policy Environment in Turkana.

3.1. The Colonial Period

Between 1885 and 1963, Kenya was under the 'protection' of the British administration. Morgan (1973) argues that for easier management, the British administration divided Kenya into three distinct regions: the highly developed White Highlands; a less developed naturelands which was a pool of cheap labour; and the frontier/pastoral zones that were out of bounds. The British were mainly interested in the 'White Highlands'. According to Morgan (1973), the prime interest of the British in the 'white Highlands' was derived from a desire for transformation and intensification of crop production for export. The pastoral areas in Kenya were then seen by the British administration as areas where they could not develop reliable sources of strategic raw materials with which to supply their home industries. This was compounded by the distance of pastoral territories from the administrative centre of the colonial powers. The pastoral areas were closed off and one needed a permit to travel there. Barber (1968) pointed out that the colonial government priority in pastoral areas was order rather than development. Left on their own, pastoralists suffered from negligence and lack of attention. They witnessed very little interaction with the other communities in Kenya, and development within their areas was only focused on preserving security and the culture of the community (Republic of Kenya 1992).

3.2. The period of colonial administration (Engolekume) 1888-1963

Von Hohnel (1894) and Lamphear (1992) explained that Count Samuel Teleki Von Szek, a Transylvania aristocrat, whose expedition reached Turkana in June of 1888, was among the first brutal Europeans to travel to Turkana. He had a very low opinion of Africans and boasted openly of shooting 300 "niggers" during his expedition. "I do not like the blackman", he wrote, "I regard him as one big monkey" (Lamphear 1992: 53). He was accompanied by an Austrian naval lieutenant, Ritter Ludwig von Hohnel, who served as the expedition's geographer and recorder. They were followed by a succession of explorers: Fredrick Jackson, a British man in 1889; Donaldson Smith an American in 1895; Arthur H. Neumann a Briton in 1895; and Vittorio Bottego, an Italian, Henry Cavendish, a British

adventurer, and Hugh Cholmondeley, a British hunter in 1897. Lamphear (1976) expressed that these Europeans were also followed by a series of mostly prejudiced and sometimes violent explorers and hunters. It could be noted that despite these explorers visiting Turkana, key decisions which would have profound effects on the future of Turkana were still being made in far off places as the British administration was based within the Kenya highlands (Lamphear 1992). Barber (1968) claims that Turkana was a marginal area in every way. The harsh environment and sparse population offered few attractions to the colonial government. Turkana was not considered to be strategically important, and it showed no evidence of economic potential to justify the cost of subjecting it to regular administration. As a result, little if any attention was given to the Turkana pastoralists, their environment or their social promotion.

Hendrickson, *et al.* (1998) argue that the isolation of the Turkana people was generally because of the colonial government's mistrust of their lifestyle. The colonial government had a notion that Turkana pastoralists were politically unreliable and difficult to control, and therefore a threat to security. Furthermore, the Turkana people were perceived as primitive, violent, and hostile towards change, and they lacked loyalty because of crossborder movements (Hendrickson, *et al.* 1998). But Markasis (1993:193) argues to the contrary that the use of negative terms such as "warlike" and "violent" was a way of creating an enemy image and using it as an ideological justification for counter aggression.

3.3. The Period of Dispersals (*Apetaret*) 1901-1924.

Generally, the period 1901-1924 is known as *apetaret* (the dispersals'). It is within this period that the British engaged in their last major raid on the Turkana people (Erukudi 1985). The war led to noticeable movements of various Turkana groups to other areas outside their territory, and the majority were welcomed by their neighbours the Samburu, Borana, Rendille, Karamajong, and Ngijiyee as new immigrants, or accepted either as workers or associates for mutual benefit. It is worth noting here that the brutal military action taken against the Turkana during this period was instigated by two major factors: Firstly, there were inaccurate and exaggerated accounts of the circumstances in Turkana by early European fortune hunters. For instance, Von Hohnel (1894) had illustrated an etching depicting three Turkana warriors flying in the air supposedly to attack him. It could be argued that these illustrations were meant to over dramatize the Turkana people as warlike and fierce people, and

to frighten and encourage the British to prepare before launching any attack on the Turkana, since this sketchy information led to the shooting of any male Turkana found holding a spear or walking stick. Though the spear and walking stick are part of the normal attire for Turkana men. Lamphear (1992) also argues that the trooping dance (*akinyiak*), which is often done while raising the walking stick held in one hand, is a traditional activity and part of the welcome gesture, which does not actually mean flying in the air to fight somebody.

Secondly, Lamphear (1992) emphasizes the perceived need by the British to conquer the Turkana people and confine them within the Turkana region for the sake of peace and order, and to save neighbouring communities from being swallowed up. But as discussed, the conquest had nothing to do with peace but had a lot to do with protecting British Interests. Collins (1961) and Lamphear (1992) remark that, contrary to the British idea of protecting Turkana neighbours, the conquest was actually aimed at disrupting the evolving relationship between the Turkana and Ethiopians which threatened British economic and political interests in East Africa. For instance, by the 19th century, King Menelik II of Ethiopia was expanding his realm of influence into the region south and west of the country. The Ethiopians were laying claims to the Turkana area and obtaining ivory from the Turkana people by bartering firearms with them, which the Turkana used with intense ferocity to raid other tribes and fight the colonial power. This expansion made the British apprehensive about the Ethiopian motives, and they decided to expand their influence to the Turkana region. Thus, the British expansion was aimed at counteracting the Ethiopian expansion (Barber 1968). There was also concern that the Turkana threat was forcing other groups southward, thereby posing a serious challenge to settlers in the white highlands (Muller 1989).

According to Lamphear (1976), the peak of the British invasion was experienced in the period 1911-1918. During this time, the British mounted a series of serious military expeditions to break Turkana resistance and to seize firearms. Despite being poorly armed, and rather than being subdued, the Turkana responded with valour by escalating raids on other tribes and the King's African Rifles (KAR) (Lamphear 1976; Barber 1968). This plunged the region into one of the most protracted and costly wars of primary resistance in Africa (Barber 1968; Lamphear 1976). The Turkana evolved an effective system for the universal mobilization of young men into well-drilled corporate units. This made it possible for them to resist for over ten years the imposition of colonial hegemony over them (Lamphear 1976). By 1918, after many thousands of

cattle and small stock had been confiscated by the British, the Turkana heroic struggle to keep their independence was dealt a mortal blow. Thus the British succeeded in pacifying Turkana resistance in 1918 (Lamphear, 1976; Muller, 1989).

During this era of primary resistance, the Turkana suffered heavy losses in men and property, and there was a complete disruption of their economy leaving many households impoverished (Lamphear 1976; Barber 1968; Muller 1989). Lamphear (1992) describes the experiences as traumatic and devastating. The Turkana were fired at from sight, and, on more than one occasion, they referred to themselves as wild animals hunted through the bush by the colonial government. Lamphear (1976) maintained that the imperial wars and punitive expeditions also destroyed the existing institutional relationships with neighbouring ethnic groups, making the basis for inter-ethnic relations insecure. Thus, the social security system of reciprocal assistance was completely disrupted. It also undermined the group's political unity, as different sections were identified with opposing belligerent parties (Lamphear 1976). Many of their livestock were captured and carried away by colonial troops. While it may be difficult to know how many people were killed or died from starvation and diseases arising from the livestock confiscation, historical records show, for instance, that between 1916 and 1918, an estimated quarter million livestock were confiscated from the Turkana, and many more were slaughtered by the various British expeditions and garrisons for their rations. The reduction of Turkana herds was carried out far more systematically and extensively than any which had occurred before. By the end of 1918, the northern sections had lost nearly all their cattle, and as late as 1933, many Turkana herds had still not been rebuilt to their former size (Barber 1968; Lamphear 1976; Muller 1989).

Further reports during the same period expressed the fear that the district was faced with the problems of rapidly increasing human population and declining livestock numbers. Diseases and raids by the colonial troops were blamed for the depletion of the herds (Lamphear 1976). Livestock diseases such as rinderpest and pleuropneumonia, which were unknown in the past, became a permanent scourge to the animal population during this period. On this, Van Zwanenberg and King comment:

“Red water, East Coast fever, rinderpest, pleuropneumonia and tsetse fly have been major scourges of the animal population of most of the pastoral communities in the nineteenth century. There is some evidence which suggests that these diseases have become common only fairly recently to East

Africa, as a result of greater mobility and the opening of the country by explorers. Redwater and East Coast fever, for instance both tick borne diseases, are said to have been imported through South Africa and Madagascar around 1870s. Rinderpest is a virus which seems to have been introduced in Africa through Northern part of East Africa around 1840s, and pleuropneumonia, also a virus infected African cattle from South Africa at about the same time” (Van Zwanenberg and King 1975: 85).

By the mid-1920s, officers on the spot voiced concern that large captures had led to cases of human-induced starvation and hoped that the colonial policy towards the Turkana would be reversed to avert a future economic crisis (Turkana Political Records: Miscellaneous: 1921-1945 File No. TURK/17, DC/TURK 1/1).

4. Imperialism and Land-Use System

The colonial policy in relation to land use is of particular interest in this paper, as the issue constitutes the major underlying causes for changes in livelihood strategies in Turkana during the colonial era. Prior to the colonial rule, the relationships between the Turkana and their neighbours in Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, and Ethiopia were characterized by open borders, that is, there were no land boundaries separating the areas where the various communities lived or grazed their livestock herds. The Turkana had access to grazing lands in Baringo, the land of the Marakwet, the Njemps, the Pokot, the Samburu, Karamajong and Ngijiye in Uganda, Topos in Sudan, Merille, Dodos, and Dongiro in Ethiopia (Lamphear 1992). The situation drastically changed when the British colonial rule was enforced in the Turkana area.

Following the pacification in 1918, the British disarmed the Turkana people, making them vulnerable to raids from their neighbouring tribes (Oba 1992). The British ratified the borders with Ethiopia, and embarked on policies which had profound ramifications for Turkana pastoralism. One policy prohibited Turkana from crossing international borders. They created a no-man’s land along the international frontiers. The idea was to make important pasture and water resources, which Turkana depended upon during drought years, legally inaccessible (Oba 1992). Lamphear (1976) reports that violators of these restrictions were punished by an instant fine of 20 percent of the total number of livestock found trespassing. However, fixed borders are alien to the pastoral mode of land

use. The borders hinder free movement of pastoralists and livestock, and access to grazing land and water sources which are important during drought conditions (Spencer 1983). Therefore, the establishment of borders prohibited their movements between the wet season grazing within Turkana territory, and the dry season grazing movements, which took them across international borders (Oba 1992). Traditionally, the Turkana and other groups each maintained concessions over grazing and water rights, expecting reciprocal access when conditions were reversed. This important fact, though well-known, was ignored by the British administration (Turkana Development Annual Report 1938). Instead, the administration assumed the responsibility of arranging with those neighbouring countries also under British administration (Sudan and Uganda), but not including Ethiopia, for the Turkana to be allowed to use grazing and water resources across international borders. The colonial administration also denied the Dassenetch pastoralists in Ethiopia access to their traditional grazing grounds in Kenya. The Ethiopians countered by refusing Turkana access to Ethiopian territory (Oba 1992).

Notwithstanding their ultimate submission, the Turkana were alarmed by the attitude of the British administration. They viewed the British action as aimed at punishing them, while ignoring their rights to grazing grounds outside their territory. It was their conviction that the border administration and security structures were merely used to reinforce control over them, and to affect their mode of nomadism, which results from ecological demands necessitating mobility to balance ecological heterogeneity (Oba 1992).

Generally, these artificial boundaries imposed by the British to control human and capital livestock movements caused serious ecological problems in the Turkana region. Following the droughts of the 1930s and ’40s, environmental degradation became a contentious issue in the whole of north West Kenya. The colonial government then introduced controlled grazing schemes culminating in the first ten-year development plan (1946-1955) aimed at rehabilitating rangelands (Dietz 1987; Migot Adhola and Little 1981).

The grazing schemes were expected to alleviate environmental degradation (Turkana Development Annual Report 1943). According to the British, the reasons for the establishment of the grazing schemes were twofold: Firstly, to facilitate proper utilization of resources which were underutilized, and secondly, to push the Turkana away from the inter-tribal boundary to ensure they were safe (Turkana Development Annual Report 1943). The idea of

grazing schemes was vehemently opposed by the Turkana people. According to Oba (1992), the grazing schemes negatively affected the Turkana people because it had ignored three important factors of Turkana rangelands: Firstly, rainfall regimes are highly erratic and vary both in space and time; thus, one good year is usually followed by a series of bad ones, occasioning opening up of all grazing resources. Secondly, some grazing areas depended on by Turkana during periods of drought lie outside the district. Thirdly, the traditional wet and dry season grazing areas are deliberately set aside for use when needed most, and access to these resources is essential for the survival of the Turkana pastoral economy. The schemes failed to incorporate these traditional seasonal movements, superimposing measures which could not work. Oba (1992) argues further that since Turkana people are pastoralists, grazing control is unlikely to succeed. The low and unreliable rainfall in Turkana dictates that any form of grazing system must be extremely flexible and must be built on the traditional Turkana grazing movements, taking into consideration the need to cooperate with neighbouring countries of Uganda, Sudan and Ethiopia.

In addition to border restrictions and movement control, and the grazing schemes, the colonial government also imposed on the Turkana people market taxes, destocking campaigns, and quarantine. Initially, vigorous quarantine regulation was meant to restrict the spread of animal diseases, but instead, it provided a means to confiscate much of the land with the highest agricultural potential to settlers (Spencer 1983). Taxation also made border trade difficult and less profitable. By the 19th Century, most Turkana groups had adopted transhumance, a settled form of pastoralism through which only animals are moved in search of pasture and waters while the families settle 'permanently' in given locations (Oca, 1992).

5. Conclusion

The discussion in this paper has considered some of the salient aspects of the historical institutional and policy environment concerning the livelihood of the Turkana people. An attempt has been made to trace the history of food insecurity in the Turkana District, and it is suggested history of negative colonial policy environment was a contributory factor. The paper argues that the inimical policies by the colonial governments were totally at variance with the Turkana peoples' own understanding of how their livelihoods could be sustained, and have had a predominantly disruptive overall impact in terms of food security.

6. References

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