

Firearms and Political Power: The Military Decline of the Turkana of Kenya 1900 – 2000

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ABSTRACT

The article is a humble contribution to our understanding of traditional African militaries by trying to discern the significance of firearms in the political-military decline of the Turkana community of Kenya. Before the nineteenth century, the Turkana had a large army and commanded such great respect among their pastoral neighbours that they always provided the paramount chief. Their army was tailored for pastoral raids and predatory expansion that suited their social and physical environment. However they encountered the British colonial army at a time they were experiencing a rivalry among their diviner-cum-military leaders. The community was devastated by colonial expeditions and a repressive system of administration that disarmed them and curtailed their tradition of reciprocal raids. In converse, their pastoral neighbours continued to arm and raid with impunity, as they were not under effective administration of either Ethiopia or Sudan. The situation has continued to the present day. In an area awash with automatic weapons the disadvantage to the Turkana community is clearly conspicuous.

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Keywords: Turkana, military history, pastoralism

INTRODUCTION

Whereas the study of warfare is itself a recent concern for social scientists, contextualised African military studies have not emerged to attract the international scholarship that could nurture the development of a distinctive literary genre. The limited interest for the development could be attributed to the fact that Africans, unlike, say, the Chinese or Russians, have never presented a corporate military threat to the industrialised world. Therefore, social scientists tend to concentrate on 'hot' themes that closely dovetail with geo-political interests of the developed world. Ultimately there is less research funding for the study of limited warfare such as feuding and livestock raiding among pastoral communities, which leads to a conspicuous imbalance in our knowledge and lack

of overall perspective of sub-national tensions.¹ Even so, a few historians have enriched our knowledge of pre-colonial African wars such as the 1964 study of the Yoruba by Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith, Bethwell Ogot's papers on some pre-colonial militaries (1969),² and Joseph Smaldone's research on the Sokoto Caliphate (1970). From their contributions on select pre-colonial societies, we can decipher that traditional African armies had competent military structures and doctrine for war at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Also, a distinctive African way of war is discernible although there lacks a generic study that could be a basis for scholarly analysis given that most researchers are limited to specific societies and geographical commonplace. Consequently, it has not always been easy to unravel factors that led to the fragmentation of certain African kingdoms or the disintegration of African militaries. This article is an historical analysis of the linkage and significance of firearms and political power in the politico-military decline of the Turkana community of north-western Kenya and southern Sudan from 1900 to the present day.

1. PHYSICAL SETTING

The area to the north of Lake Turkana roughly joins up north-eastern Uganda with south-eastern Sudan, south-western Ethiopia and north-western Kenya. The region may be described as mythical land that is virtually free from industrial pollution as there lacks technological investment and, paradoxically, it is idyllic due to the absence of stress that accompanies 'civilisation'. Its distinct physical and human characteristics are aridity, low relief, and nomadic pastoralism. Due to the lack of permanent running water, except along River Omo, living organisms including humans just manage to survive. There are numerous hills to the north of Turkana consisting of volcanic outcrops that embrace cool temperatures particularly at night. Surrounding Lake Turkana is Chalbi, an insalubrious landmass that geographers classify as a true desert. (Ogendo and Ojany 1981) It is a flat and rocky arid belt with clusters of open bush that are too brittle to support life except for subterranean animal species. Lake Turkana is a large water mass that is resourceful in fish and home for the near extinct El Molo islanders. The population of this closed community of slender dark people that are renowned crocodile hunters and swimmers has decreased to 500 people due to biological factors particularly inbreeding and the monotonous diet of fish. (KNA: PC/NFD1/1/2; Kurian 1992)

¹ For the purpose of this discussion, livestock rustling is organised violence by one ethnic community or clan against another to intimidate and achieve economic security and cultural supremacy through the monopoly of livestock.

² Bethwell Ogot's work springs from the proceedings of a symposium by the Social Science Council, University College, University of East Africa (re-named University of Nairobi), Nairobi, 1969.

2. THE TURKANA AND THEIR PASTORAL NEIGHBOURS

The borderlands north of Lake Turkana is home to six ethnic communities that transhume into the territory from their permanent home in Uganda, Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia or Sudan. They are the Turkana, Nyangatom, Didinga, Dodoth, Toposa, and Dassanetch. Research by the Bible Translation Literacy (1996) estimates the population of the Turkana to be 340,000 and the community is organised in territorial sections such as the Ngwatella that strides the Kenya-Sudan boundary and extends south to Lake Turkana. To a casual visitor Turkanas have different shades of skin texture between dark brown and black but are indistinct in their mode of dressing. Turkana, Karimojong and Toposa share similar traditions such as the smearing of an initiands' hair with mud, which is decorated with colourful plumes from rare birds, ostriches, and guinea fowls. Traditionally, a small triangular cloth or soft cowhide was all that covered their genitalia but nowadays old men wear a thick blanket that is secured by a knot on one shoulder. Men were traditionally seen carrying a well-shaped walking stick, and their artistically crafted multi-purpose stool that was carved out of special hard wood, which they used as a pillow, a seat, and a shield during close-quarter fighting. For men and women, the lower lip is plugged with a metal cap or meticulously handcrafted piece of wood. Women wear decorative beads and are known to be good fighters with their hands and sticks particularly during courtship. Stick fights are forms of status competitions that mark the coming of age for the youth. Although they are not motivated by anger, they are intended to hurt and test an individual's physical stamina and perseverance. Short of inter-section feuds or cross-community conflicts, stick fights are the best means of instilling esprit de corps and valour among young pastoral warriors. In this patriarchal community tattooing is a common expression of manliness. When they appear on a man's right shoulder they symbolise the number of male enemy warriors he has killed. However, tattoos on the stomach are past mutilations by traditional healers to cure various ailments or to exorcise demons that bring diseases.

The Nyangatom, also known as Bume, have their home in Sudan's Equatoria Province around the Kibish wells and in south west Ethiopia between River Kibish and River Omo. They migrated north-eastwards from Uganda due to Turkana pressure.³ They are actually a splinter group from the Toposa of Sudan but expanded north-eastwards until they came under the administration of Ethiopia. The community is divided into three sections; Musingo, Lokalyan and Magwois. Their women grow sorghum and millet while the men tend livestock. They have numerous exogamous clans such as the Nyikuren clan of fire-makers, which has an important role in war. The age-grade, age-class and bull-class regulate a man's status in the community. Livestock is so important in both symbolic and economic sense that each man has a favourite bull that is central to his material

³ It is not clear whether this movement was due to warfare or it was voluntary translocation to ease pressure on water and pasture.

and spiritual existence. Before the Sudanese authorities set foot in Toposaland in 1927, the community had been under the authority of their own councils of elders that closely resembled democratic institutions. Their traditional weaponry includes; spear, shield, and a circular wrist knife for fistfights. During the dry season, they migrate south into the Kenya-Sudan border region with their milch animals. They belong to the Karamojong cluster of languages but speak a dialect similar to the language spoken by the Toposa with whom they have close bond through intermarriage. (Colson 1996) The population of the Nyangatom is estimated to be 5,000 people. Men look after livestock for long periods away from home. (Matsuda 1994) Women and girls practice retreat cultivation along River Omo and River Kibish taking advantage of rich clayey soil that is left by flooding. Some of them have permanent settlements along the Omo, which becomes the breadbasket for the rest of the community along the Kibish riverine area whose harvest is not always reliable. (Turton 1991) They live on a monotonous diet of meat and milk. Women try subsistence agriculture where they grow millet, maize, cowpeas, and some tobacco. Nevertheless, an agricultural mode of subsistence is constrained by the scarcity of arable land and erratic rainfall patterns.

The Didinga are a pastoral people that straddle the Uganda-Sudan border. During the dry season the men maintain the tradition of moving their cattle to the hills northwest of Lake Turkana where they are in constant friction with the Turkana and Toposa. (Driberg 1922) Their southern neighbours are the Dodoth also known as Dodos or Doto, of Uganda that seasonally spill over into south-eastern Sudan and western Turkana pastures. Dodoth language is described as the central Paraniotic and their economic lifestyle is similar to that of the Nyangatom and Toposa. (Colson 1996) Dodoth women grow sorghum, millet, and maize to supplement the monotonous diet of meat and milk. Still, a good crop is rare due to constant drought and the lack of investment in agricultural technology. There are occasions after the Turkana have raided them they retaliate on the Jie who are Turkana allies. The rugged escarpment between the Dodoth and the Turkana makes it much easier for the Turkana to raid the Dodoth than vice versa. (CO 822/3050) Although pre-colonial feuds were common between groups falling under the leadership of traditional Dodoth chiefs, groups tended to forget their differences and unite to face a common enemy. Their traditional weapons include a long spear and shield, short stabbing spear for close quarter battle, and a sharp wrist knife for hand-to-hand combat. They also carry a special spear for hunting and stick both for aiding walking and driving cattle.

The Toposa ('Topotha' to the Turkana) speak a language similar in dialect to that of the Turkana. Their home is the north-eastern district of Uganda along the north-western fringes of Turkanaland and in Sudan's Equatoria Province. Men are herders while the women lead a sedentary lifestyle in the villages. Anthropologists classify the Nyangatom, Toposa, Karamajong, Turkana, and Jie among the Eastern Nilotes the classification index being similarity in language. Nonetheless, the degree of linguistic differentiation is minimal to the extent that the Nyangatom, Turkana, and Toposa are linguistically intelligible. Since they trace their roots to

the Karamojong cluster of languages, they all seem to speak the same language with different dialects. The confusion is such that the Ethiopian Nyangatom in the area of Kibish wells along the Sudan-Ethiopia boundary are called Nyangatom in Kenya and Bume in Sudan. (Turton 1994)

The Dassanetch, are also known as Murle to the Turkana of Kenya whereas in Ethiopia, the Amhara refer to them as Gelluba or Rashiat. Their northern neighbours are the Nyangatom whereas in the south-east they neighbour the Gabbra and the Turkana in the south-west. Their military history and general arms bearing is well established with various records claiming that in 1944 they could parade 3,000 fighting men. (KNA: DC/ISO/2/5/5) Whereas the correctness of each account is debatable, all scholars establish that bearing of arms was a tradition that existed before 1900 when Britain established its colonial presence in east Africa.⁴ The Dassanetch people numbering 15,000 inhabit an area extending more than 2,000 square kilometres along River Omo north of Lake Turkana. (Matsuda 1994) Most of them live in Ethiopia but some are found in Kenya and Sudan on the northern tip of Lake Turkana. They tend livestock but also practice subsistence agriculture in the fertile soils of the Omo delta. Like their northern neighbours, they cultivate where flooding has left alluvial deposits suitable for agriculture. However, the erratic seasons of the floods prevent them from adopting a purely sedentary agricultural economy.

It is fitting to describe each of the above communities as semi-pastoral using Jacobs' (1965) definition of true pastoralists as: 'people making their living wholly off their flocks without settling down to plant, or people who are chiefly dependent on their herds of domestic stock for subsistence'. Common to all the communities is the significance of livestock especially cattle that is vital for their survival in the sense of subsistence, but more so in a symbolic and spiritual sense. All lead a nomadic life in that they constantly shift their habitat to conform to ecological and demographic imperatives and not, as often implied, to live as uncertain wanderers. Grazing for the herders is between different altitudinal zones, alternating between the scarplands north of Lake Turkana during drought and the dry plains during the wet seasons. Generally, this borderland region is an extremely harsh physical environment and in order to ensure survival, transhumance is marked by incessant contention and struggle between the above communities over scarce water and pasturage sources.⁵ For this reason, where each community chooses to settle is influenced by the habitat and need for physical security. Hardly any of these semi-pastoral people develop sentimental ties to specific localities, as do sedentary agricultural communities although certain pastures and portions of arable riverbanks may be associated with a particular clan or ethnic community. Homesteads for each ethnic group must therefore be impermanent due to the ecological necessity to move every so

⁴ Existing evidence supports Almagor's (1978) finding that the Dassanetch arms race proper started in the 1930s.

⁵ Transhumance is considered to encompass migratory drift in response to climatic necessity and also due to violent displacement by neighbours.

often which leads to significant population dispersal. A similar code is applied to rights over water, which are claimed by a particular group only when there is acute scarcity. In the latter case boreholes, water pans, and dams, temporarily become the property of the ethnic community, section, or clan that built them. Whenever disputes over these resources cannot be resolved amicably the people must arm and physically fight for their control. Moreover, the presence of authorities from Addis Ababa, Kampala, Nairobi, or Khartoum remains a nominal one ostensibly due to geographical distance from each capital, but more likely due to the logistical strain and security demands for the administration of the borderlands. (McEwen 1971; Ngatia 1984).

3. MILITARY DECLINE OF THE TURKANA DURING COLONIALISM 1900 -1963

The encounter between the colonizer and the indigenous pastoral people in the 19th century should be seen in its wider context as a clash of not only dissimilar cultures but also one of contrasting military organizations and technologies. Accordingly, analysis of the military decline of the Turkana will historically elucidate the impact of modern weapons at the strategic level particularly how colonial disarming created an opportune power vacuum that was exploited by their pastoral neighbours. The discussion will consider the dispersal of the Turkana community and the disintegration of their religious-military leadership that prevents them from reclaiming previous military dominance. It is suggested that the violent clash and imposition of military administration in Turkanaland by Britain in the last century and the lack of similar policy in Ethiopia and Sudan altered the military balance in north Turkana borderlands.⁶

The history of arms in the region spans over a century. A convenient starting point is the history of organized raids for slaves, livestock, ivory, rhinoceros horns, and other game trophies by Ethiopian interlopers and Arab merchants that predate European colonialism of the 19th century. (Earl of Lytton 1966) Before Britain established colonial rule in the territory in 1900, the hinterland of East Africa had experienced decades of trade in slaves and arms from merchants and gunrunners of Ethiopia and Sudan.⁷ (CO 533/421/4; CO 533/419/8, CO Cmd. 3217) British frontier patrols claimed that owing to the systematic depopulation of the outlying districts of Ethiopia, constant raids into northern Lake Turkana communities closest to the international boundaries sustained Ethiopia's supply of slaves. (Barbour 1961) In the first half of 1888 alone, the East African coast had been the

⁶ In this discussion, *strategic level* refers to the war effort that involves the whole society against several ethnic communities over a wide geographical area. The *operational level* refers to reciprocal raids among territorial sections or sub-tribes where military units could involve hundreds. The tactical level is opportunistic action by smaller groups whose military objectives are limited in time and space, such as localized cattle raids or inter-clan feuds.

⁷ Consult a comprehensive analysis of the establishment of colonial rule in Mburu (2000b).

conduit for as many as 37,441 assorted firearms mainly Breech-loaders and Winchester Repeater rifles. (Beachey 1962) Pastoralists' natural adeptness to conserve wildlife attracted Abyssinians game hunters to their resourceful environment who brought some weapons and also lured armed Arab and Swahili, poachers, merchants and slave traders from the East African coast.

Traditionally, the Turkana were a coherent group organized around a generation-set system. However, by the eighteenth century they split due to ecological and demographic pressures and the need to dominate trade in ironware and grain. They expanded east into Lake Turkana, south into Turkwel and Kerio valleys, and northwards into Sudan. Turkana's dexterity with firearms and other aspects of their culture portrayed a strong military tradition. It may be deduced that their military strength lay in the fact that their warriors did not constitute a standing army but were part-and-parcel of the society in its daily political, economic, social and religious affairs. Mobilization for war was therefore easy, as there was a readily available militia to draw from.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Lokerio emerged as the charismatic military and spiritual leader for all the Turkana. His method of harmonizing military activities of widely scattered territorial sections was by the use of messengers. His messengers were similar to the Couriers or Runners used by modern armies; their main characteristics being flexibility, loyalty and speed. In a way he was able to communicate, command, and control military activities of widely dispersed armies. Turkana military success during the nineteenth century is attributed to Lokerio's mystical religious powers and corporate generalship at the strategic level. In the early twentieth century, the Turkana encountered the British colonial army at a time the community was undergoing internal dissension due to leadership rivalry between two diviners, Kokoi and Lokorijam. (Lamphear 1994) Resistance to British military conquest was weak as some Turkana sections collaborated with the colonizer whereas those defiant evaded confrontation by simply relocating north to sanctuaries in Ethiopia. By mid 1917, the Turkana realized that their Ethiopian allies could not provide them adequate protection from the better-armed soldiers of the Kings African Rifles. Apart from the Kwatela, other Turkana sections decided to stay in British jurisdiction without necessarily feeling they had surrendered their independence. They reverted to their traditional military-religious leadership and were able to rebuild their army to around four thousand to five thousand fighters armed with rifles and traditional weapons. (KNA: DC/ISO/2/1/15; KNA: K.967.6203 TUR) Turkana age-sets began to resemble military units that were best suited for reciprocal raiding with pastoral neighbours. They were not structured along overlapping layers of bureaucracy, as this was not necessary either for cattle rustling or for punitive expeditions on their neighbours. Turkana's way of war had been designed to stealthily close in with the enemy employing independent raid parties, snatch livestock, and engage in close combat using single shot rifles and a paraphernalia of traditional weapons. However, colonial troops were used to stand off battles from where they massed fires using area weapons such as air, artillery, machine

guns, and armour. Hence, it may be deduced that Turkana military defeat by the British was not so much caused by tactical limitations and technological mismatch, as by having a military organization that was not tailored for the type of total war introduced by the colonial army.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, further Turkana expansion had a negative impact on their corporate identity and military effectiveness that made British imperial conquest relatively easy. (CO 927/161/5) Therefore, the encounter with the British through military conquest accelerated the disintegration of the Turkana at the strategic level. This military destruction was consolidated through the introduction of the colonial system of administration where low-ranking civil servants called chiefs further eroded the religious-cum-military authority of traditional leaders. Colonial boundaries were introduced that put restriction on transhumant migrations and imposed an alien system of solving community disputes, which usurped the gerontocratic authority previously vested with community elders. (Mburu 2000a) It is notable that before colonialism, chiefly authority constrained unnecessary conflicts and when they occurred, it regulated bloodletting and devastation. For example, there existed a poly-tribal council of elders known as Lukiko, which settled inter-community disputes over water, grazing, or livestock thefts, between the Nyangatom, Turkana, Dassanetch and Toposa without recourse to war. (KNA: DC/ISO/2/1/15; KNA: K.967.6203 TUR) However, this traditional institution was destroyed by the British system of colonial administration that was backed by the force of modern weapons. Given that charismatic authority previously held by their elders brought people together, the new system of authority failed to maintain a respectable form of security among the heavily armed nomads that trans-grazed into Lake Turkana region. Furthermore, after the death in British detention of Kokoi, Turkana's diviner and military supremo, there occurred a conspicuous leadership vacuum at the strategic level. The humiliating incarceration and death of Kokoi was deterrence to the emergence of another spiritual leader and military commander for the whole Turkana ethnic community.

It may be claimed that frontier policing by Britain commenced immediately after the establishment of colonial rule in East Africa, but it was only in 1928 that British administration proper started along the Sudan-Kenya-Ethiopia border region north of Lake Turkana. (McEwen 1971) Effective colonial administration was preceded by a disarming exercise of the residents of the borderlands that were in British East Africa before any form of law and order could be established. These were the Turkana. A successful disarming of other pastoral nomads was only feasible through consensus and if it was conducted concurrently by Kenya, Sudan, and Ethiopia along the common boundaries. As a result of the one-sided disarming, the Turkana community became vulnerable to the Dassanetch, Toposa, and Nyangatom of Ethiopia and Sudan. Previously, social relationships between these communities had not created permanent delineation between victors and victims. For example, before 1927, the Turkana and Dassanetch enjoyed a political alliance with the former being the dominant partner that always provided the

paramount chief. When Britain started administering Turkana land in 1928, the Dassanetch used firearms obtained from their Ethiopian allies and boldly attacked the Turkana killing 215 in cold blood. (KNA: DC/ISO/2/5/5) In 1929, the Dassanetch repeated the incursion and massacred 135 Turkana in a single attack. This did not dissuade the British from continuing disarming the Turkana, which they completed in 1939, the year the Turkana lost 260 unarmed people killed by the Dassanetch. Such was the plight of the Turkana up to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

During the Second World War Turkana warriors enrolled in large numbers as Askari for the Kings African Rifles not primarily to fight for King and country as to acquire military skills and weapons for the purpose of punishing their northern neighbours. (Mburu 1999) Unfortunately for them, Italy had also recruited heavily and armed their enemies across the border (the Dassanetch and Nyangatom) as the Fascists' frontier defence force against the Allies. After the World War, the two northern communities were able to continue raiding the disarmed Turkana for livestock, which the post-war British administration could not control with its outstretched military personnel and material resources. For example, in 1957 182 Turkana were massacred. Again, on March 18 1958, the Nkoroma people raided a village inside Sudan inhabited by the Ngwatella section of the Turkana and killed 23 people. (KNA: DC/ISO/2/1/15; KNA: K.967.6203.TUR) Thereafter, very considerable inter-community raids marked the period of British colonial rule in Kenya. Many Turkana were killed and others forced to displace by the previously hapless Toposa, Dassanetch, and Nyangatom of Sudan and Ethiopia who raided for cattle, sheep, goats, and donkeys. Punitive patrols by British troops into southwestern Ethiopia were usually battles of equals in correlation of forces, firepower, and sophistication in weaponry especially after Italy's occupation of Ethiopia in 1936. The Turkana complained that the colonial government had disarmed them and imposed laws that prevented them from rearming or freely conducting cross-border reciprocal raids on their traditional enemies. Furthermore, by failing to protect the disarmed Turkana the British created a security vacuum which generated an arms race hitherto unprecedented in the framework of pastoral relationships. Previously, raids were mainly for cattle. Nevertheless, after the disarming of the Turkana, firearms became a significant *Casus Belli* to the extent that the Dassanetch were selling rifles to the disarmed Turkana and then stealing them back to test the courage of their warriors. Raiding for sport was a new phenomenon in pastoral relationships that was only possible due to the military imbalance created by the disarming of the Turkana.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF MODERN WEAPONS IN THE POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

Having linked the military decline of the Turkana to colonial military intrusion, it is imperative to examine factors that have enabled their pastoral neighbours to rise

militarily from 1963 to the present day. Although the population of a specific community was traditionally important in maintaining the local military balance, inter-community trade in the borderlands was not constrained or promoted by the military equation. For example, although the Turkana had retained military dominance over the Dassanetch before the British disarmed them, they had peacefully bartered their ironware with grain from their northern neighbours. (Major White 1920; Major Austin 1903) The two communities set aside the extant history of predatory expansion and continued to experience such a high degree of barter and intermarriage that the Turkana, traditionally cattle and donkey herders, adopted the camel from their Dassanetch neighbours. (CO927/161/5) By introducing money as a medium of exchange the colonizer destroyed the personal touch associated with barter and the relationship of reciprocity. (Sobania 1991) Today, such rapprochement that can heal bad blood is nonexistent and numbers do not matter during combat as frequent large-scale cattle raids indicate a community's access to modern weapons. Conversely, high attrition on a particular community suggests their limited access to appropriate quality and quantity of firearms. Both the liberation movement of southern Sudan and the Sudanese government, which have had noticeable effect on the organization and the military equation in this borderland region, arm most pastoral communities. (Africa Confidential 1985, 1991) In one way or other close proximity to the zone of civil war in southern Sudan has influenced the lives of pastoral youth that are often press ganged to leave school and join the fighting. (East African Standard 1997; Africa Confidential 1997) A few examples will illustrate the impact of modern weapons on traditional inter-ethnic conflicts at the operational level and its effect on political alliances of whole ethnic communities.

The rise of the Dassanetch is important in clarifying the problem under discussion in that their operational effectiveness emanates from their ability to adopt new military technology to their traditional tactics. (Almagor 1978) Their raiding parties are small, highly mobile, and with strong social bonding that make them formidable fighters. Given that poor tactics often vitiates the advantages inherent in superior technology the Dassanetch have had the liberty to experiment on the effectiveness of their Kalashnikov automatic weapons by frequently raiding the Turkana, Nyangatom, and Toposa neighbours. The community's lack of stringent administrative control from Ethiopia has increased their liberty to use firearms. Whereas the Turkana remain the most populous community in the area, their lack of adequate firepower has prevented them from regaining their pre-colonial military dominance or achieving some military parity with the Dassanetch.

Secondly, punitive cross-frontier military patrols by the regional authorities are rare and when conducted, they are poorly coordinated and become mere flag shows. At the time of writing, frontier policing is one-sided and not deterrent as regional governments lack common strategy, interest or administrative grip in the periphery of the State. For example, better than any regional country today, Uganda has the combat competence, logistics, and motivation to effectively

police its northeastern frontier with the Pokot and Turkana of Kenya as well as the Toposa of Sudan. However, Ugandan troops could feel constrained because the authorities in Khartoum will not co-operate and will only suspect them of propping-up the SPLA. Kenya suffers similar frustration as Dassanetch raiders always avoid punishment by withdrawing deeper into Ethiopia where Sudan will not bother them and Kenyan patrols cannot pursue them without violating Ethiopia's sovereignty.

A third factor that explains the political-military rise of the Dassanetch is their mobilization for raids, which is easy due to their centralized age-system. Unlike the Turkana of Kenya, the Ethiopian State has never subdued this community through military conquest, administration, or disarmament.⁸ In addition, the Dassanetch have maintained their corporate solidarity in the last century having never experienced a territorial split or disruption of their military leadership. Their habitat in the area of River Omo provides a springboard for raids and a fortress for defence unlike the roving Turkana or Gabbra that are scattered in the semi-arid country south of Dassanetchland. Unlike the expansive Turkanaland, Dassanetchland is restricted terrain where lack of strategic depth has made the inhabitants develop offensive forms of defence. In this respect, their warfare takes the pattern of spoiling attacks where they habitually send out small pre-emptive raids not just for livestock but also to harass and intimidate their numerically superior Turkana and Toposa. Such a deterrent military capability is only achievable with good command, control, communication, and superior weaponry. Given that the population of the Dassanetch is only fifteen thousand, one can deduce that their offensive capability comes from superior tactics and weaponry they started acquiring in the 1930s that give them the liberty to dominate their neighbours. The Turkana too have rearmed and expanded but this has been the initiative of isolated territorial sections rather than a corporate effort of the whole Turkana ethnic community. Apart from spreading out too thinly, the Turkana lack collective leadership, and logistical and mobilization capability to conduct pre-colonial type of large-scale military operations. For these reasons, Turkana raids in the last six decades are only identifiable at the operational level by decentralized groups of tens and hundreds that lack the panache, numerical strength, and command structure of the pre-colonial armies.

Weapons have been instrumental in the formation of temporary political alliances where every community is a possible villain or potential victim to facilitate the annihilation of the stronger neighbour. Such alliances were common among pre-colonial pastoral armies but the carnage today is devastating and lacks any shade of fair fight. In addition, pastoral raiders of pre-colonial wars only eliminated male combatants of the opposing forces and spared women, the aged, and the disabled. This humanism was an essential norm of African way of warfare, which is in contrast with the indiscriminate bloodletting and total annihilation of

⁸ Emperor Haile Selassie's proposal of disarming the Dassanetch after WW2 was never implemented.

contemporary raids. A few examples of the Nyangatom and Toposa raids and alliances will illustrate this point.

In the 1970s the poorly armed Nyangatom were under constant attacks from their pastoral neighbours and within the decade lost about ten percent of their population. (Tornay 1998) Since they were not under the protection of any government, the Nyangatom got together in the 1980s and decided to buy modern firearms for self-defence. They bought large quantities of Kalashnikov assault rifles from different sources through barter where a new rifle was at the time exchanged for four to seven heads of cattle. (Ibid.) Their chief suppliers were the Toposa who had been armed by the government in Khartoum to destabilize the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) in southern Sudan. Other unscrupulous suppliers of automatic rifles were Ethiopian arms dealers that traded on willing-buyer-willing-seller basis. In February 1987, the Bume of Ethiopia joined forces with the Nyangatom. Using recently acquired Kalashnikov automatic rifles, they launched a massive attack on their northern Mursi neighbours killing five hundred people in one offensive. (Turton 1994) This single attack eliminated about five percent of the entire Mursi population. Another example is of 1988 when the Toposa and the Karamojong who had been armed by the government of Sudan in turn armed the Bume and Nyangatom. In April 1988 Toposa and Nyangatom raiders joined forces and conducted a lightning attack on the Turkana of Lokichoggio across the Kenya-Sudan boundary. After two days of fighting with the Kenyans, one hundred ninety Turkana lay dead and unspecified numbers wounded. (The Standard 1991) In May 1988, the Turkana retaliated the raid of April forcing the Nyangatom out of the Kibish River valley, which is the arable belt that supports their agricultural and pastoral economy. (Matsuda 1994) Another example is in 1995 when the Toposa joined their Nyangatom allies and raided the Dassanetch and Mursi for cattle forcing them to seek refuge on the eastern bank of River Omo where there is better natural protection. While the Toposa have been their main source of firearms in the last two decades, a Nyangatom militia was officially armed with Kalashnikovs by the new Ethiopian government ostensibly to replace the policing force of the disgraced Mengistu's military Junta.⁹ In contrast, the Turkana of Kenya have not received any moral or materiel support from the Kenyan authorities.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The preceding argument has been that before the nineteenth century, the Turkana had sustained their political influence over other herders with a large army. However, the encounter with the British colonial army accelerated the community's political-military decline, which had been started by a power rivalry

⁹ Rearming of the Nyangatom is arguably in recognition of their vulnerability but also a political measure by the current Ethiopian government to secure their loyalty.

among their spiritual leaders. Turkana armies were primarily tailored for reciprocal raids obtaining among pastoral nomads. They were not able to restructure their armies to cope with the new way of total war introduced by the colonial army. Their military and corresponding political power were further reduced by the British administration, which denied them the freedom of cross-border reciprocal raids after effectively disarming them. From 1963 to the present day, the Kenyan authorities have failed to arm the Turkana or provide them any respectable form of security. In contrast, their pastoral neighbours, especially the Dassanetch and Toposa have continuously exploited their social-political environment and rearmed to the consternation of the Turkana.

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