ABSTRACT

Livestock raiding among northern Kenya’s pastoralists has changed profoundly in the last decades. Fought with modern weaponry and often extreme violence, raiding is increasingly enmeshed in politicized claims over administrative boundaries, struggles for exclusive access to land, and attempts to establish or safeguard an ethnically homogeneous electoral base. These conflicts are part of Kenya’s troubled politics of decentralization and as such they must be viewed in the context of wider political developments in the country. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in East Pokot and surrounding areas in Kenya’s Central Rift Valley Province, this article demonstrates how livestock raiding emerges as a specific form of violent regulation, a well-adapted, dangerous, and powerful political weapon.

THE DEADLY ATTACK ON 42 KENYAN POLICE OFFICERS in Suguta Valley, Samburu District in mid-November 2012 sadly reminds us of the ongoing violence in East Africa’s pastoralist areas. What is probably the most deadly attack on police forces in Kenya’s history is but ‘a drop in the ocean’ compared to the daily suffering of the population in these areas, as a commentator in the Nairobi-based Daily Nation points out. Indisputably, the persistent violence in the pastoral areas in north-eastern Africa has detrimental social and economic effects.

* Clemens Greiner (clemens.greiner@uni-koeln.de) is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, University of Cologne, Germany. This article has benefitted tremendously from the detailed and informed comments of Michael Bollig. I am also indebted to Terry McCabe, Rita Abrahamsen, Nic Cheeseman, and two anonymous reviewers, whose comments were most helpful.


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Although this violence increasingly involves brutal and reckless murder, acts of ‘ethnic cleansing’, criminal marketing chains, and highway banditry, as well as ordinary petty theft, it is commonly lumped together and labelled as ‘cattle rustling’ or ‘cattle raiding’. This tends to encourage the association of more recent violence with timeless, traditional and ritualized acts of raiding, portraying it as something cultural and thus intrinsic to these societies.\textsuperscript{4} Increasingly also, cattle raiding is framed in green security debates and portrayed as an almost inevitable reaction to climate change.\textsuperscript{5} Both approaches depoliticize raiding and tend to ignore important changes within pastoralist communities and how they relate to political developments in Kenya at large.

Pastoralism in East African drylands is undergoing rapid transformations.\textsuperscript{6} In these processes, issues of territoriality emerge as main arenas of contestation. Sedentarization, rapid population growth, fragmentation and privatization of formerly communally used pastures, the spread of wildlife conservation areas, and the increasing importance of agriculture: all are factors that lead to a growing pressure on land, both within and across communities.\textsuperscript{7} The erosion of traditional governance structures has led to a power vacuum that is increasingly filled by political leaders and other power brokers, who grasp the opportunity to renegotiate boundaries and access to land. They have realized that on the national level ethnic mobilization has played a major role in political struggles, and they carry these dynamics even into the remotest pastoralist areas, where the struggle for land is progressively ethnicized.\textsuperscript{8} In this context, livestock raiding emerges


as a specific form of violent regulation: a well-adapted, dangerous, and powerful political weapon.

This article demonstrates that the patterns of ‘cattle raiding’ in northern Kenya have been enmeshed in politicized claims over administrative boundaries, struggles for exclusive access to land, and even attempts to establish or safeguard an ethnically homogeneous electoral basis. Although the links between raiders and politicians often remain obscure, I argue that violence in pastoralist areas is intimately linked to recent political developments in Kenya at large. Processes of democratization – particularly the re-establishment of multi-partyism in 1992 and the end of the Moi regime in 2002, but also the post-election violence of 2007–8 and the current political and administrative restructuring, as well as ongoing land reforms – have created windows of opportunity for violent (re)negotiation of territorial claims in the pastoralist areas in Kenya’s arid north.9

This article starts by highlighting traditional and more recent scholarly interpretations of cattle raiding. This is followed by an account of how pastoralists became increasingly enmeshed in politicized violence and how this relates to Kenya’s troubled national politics. In the main part of the article I focus on the conflict dynamics along the borders of East Pokot, and then explore the central role of administrative boundaries and the politics of devolution within these conflicts. On this basis I offer a preliminary analysis of how the practice of cattle raiding is connected to political aspirations.

This contribution is based on ethnographic data from East Pokot, Kenya. In addition to formal interviews with community elders, chiefs, district officers, politicians, peace committee members, administration police officers, and government officials, the article relies on sensitive information provided in informal exchanges. Despite a one-year presence in the area, I was often treated with suspicion once the issue of politics and raiding cropped up. Most conversations – not only with warriors involved in cattle raiding, but also with community members, government officials, or politicians willing to talk about the nexus of politics and violence – were conducted under a guarantee of anonymity.

Culture, nature, and commerce: established interpretations of cattle rustling

Warfare and cattle rustling among pastoralists in the arid and semi-arid areas of north-eastern Africa date back well into pre-colonial times.10 Before the advent of colonialism, the reason for such activities was mainly

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ascribed to the territorial expansion of specialized pastoralist groups such as the Maasai, the Nuer, the Pokot, and the Turkana. By entrenching ethnic boundaries, the colonial governments inhibited their further territorial expansion.\textsuperscript{11} Cattle raiding, however, continued.\textsuperscript{12} After independence, it regained importance and intensified with the spread of modern firearms from the mid-1970s onwards.\textsuperscript{13} A broad range of explanations has since been offered for both the persistence and the changing nature of raiding.

In the 1970s, analysis frequently focused on either cultural or ecological variables in explaining the persistence of cattle raiding among East African herders. Authors who argued for the importance of cultural factors associated raiding with the traditional social structures of pastoralist societies, and identified belief systems, identities, warrior ideals, prestige, and competition between age sets as drivers of violence.\textsuperscript{14} In a more recent contribution, Sandra Gray and colleagues portray raiding as a maladaptive cultural institution in which the value of cattle is placed above that of human beings. They argue that in attempting to preserve their cultural identity, pastoralists undermine their biological survival.\textsuperscript{15}

Most authors who emphasize ecological rather than cultural factors as root causes of livestock theft present one of two strands of argument. One strand holds that the pastoralist areas are characterized by scarcity of pasture and water and that the struggle for temporary access to these resources leads to conflict.\textsuperscript{16} The other, rooted in non-equilibrium ecosystems approaches, highlights the necessity of recuperation of livestock numbers after drought- or disease-induced losses as a motivation for


\textsuperscript{12} David Anderson, ‘Stock theft and moral economy in colonial Kenya’, Africa 56, 4 (1986), pp. 399–416. It should also be mentioned here that, particularly along the boundary between Kenya and Ethiopia, raiding has been repeatedly embroiled in international politics since the 1890s; see McCabe, Cattle Bring Us to Our Enemies.


\textsuperscript{14} See many contributions in Katsuyoshi Fukui and David Turton (eds), Warfare Among East African Herders (Senri Ethnological Studies, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, 1979).

\textsuperscript{15} Gray et al., ‘Cattle raiding, cultural survival, and adaptability’.

\textsuperscript{16} John Markakis, Resource Conflict in the Horn of Africa (Sage, London, 1998).
Proponents of the ecological approach are mainly responsible for the oft-repeated doctrine that ‘territorial conquest does not appear to be the objective of fighting’.  

Since the 1990s, researchers have emphasized the changing nature of cattle rustling. Attempts to explain this have pointed particularly to the increased proliferation of sophisticated automatic rifles such as the AK-47. Authors working with data from the 1990s add to this another dynamic: the professionalized marketing of stolen animals. While in previous decades the stolen livestock was redistributed or used to pay bride prices, rustling has more recently turned into a form of organized crime. This involves the commercialization of stolen animals, and includes actors from outside the pastoralist system. Dylan Hendrickson and colleagues describe this as a shift from ‘redistributive raiding’ to ‘predatory raiding’.

More recently, issues of climate change and environmental security have entered the debate on raiding and warfare in Africa’s arid and semi-arid areas. While some see population pressure, climate change, and resource scarcity as the fundamental triggers of inter-ethnic violence, many empirically based studies have rejected these Malthusian notions, claiming that institutions and political calculations are decisive in directing people’s responses to these factors toward either conflict or cooperation. Christopher Butler and Scott Gates, for example, point to a positive correlation between resources and conflict. This, however, is mediated by political variables, particularly by the degree of state enforcement of property rights. In contrast to much of the recent literature, which revolves around the question of whether resource scarcity or political factors trigger

inter-ethnic violence, this article explores the ways in which political forces shape these conflicts.

The politicization of pastoralist violence

In the early 1990s, clashes started in many Rift Valley districts with multi-ethnic populations. Maasai and Kipsigis warriors raided neighbouring Kikuyu, Luhya, Kamba, and other farming communities in rural areas like Molo and the Naivasha hinterland. The clashes subsequently spread to Laikipia, where Samburu and Pokot started attacking Kikuyu, who had settled there as small-scale farmers as a result of the post-independence land reforms. The clashes in Ol Moran, a small town in Laikipia, escalated in January 1998 when Pokot and Samburu warriors raided Kikuyu farmers, killing two of them, stealing their livestock and burning down their houses. A counter-attack by the Kikuyu farmers on pastoralist settlements was ambushed by well-armed Pokot and Turkana warriors who killed 39 Kikuyu youth. Shortly thereafter, Pokot and Samburu warriors attacked a Kikuyu settlement, killed two people and burned down some 25 houses. The Kikuyu did not react subsequently, and so this incident marks a provisional end to the violence. The report of the Judicial Commission appointed to inquire into tribal clashes in Kenya (the Akiwumi Report) concludes that the conflicts between these communities were instigated by ‘unsavoury and inflammatory statements by politicians’. It is noted that the Kikuyu of Ol Moran have complained of repeated livestock raids before and have received unsigned letters asking them to leave the area. A Catholic priest interviewed for the Akiwumi Report states that the violence was instigated by politicians of the Kalenjin faction to clear the area of oppositional voters with respect to the upcoming elections in 2002.

This escalation of violence relates to more general shifts in the political landscape that are part of Kenya’s troubled nation-building process. David Anderson describes in detail how the pressure for multi-partyism in the early 1990s led to the revival of majimboism as a defensive reaction, particularly by Kalenjin and Maasai politicians loyal to President Daniel

27. Ibid., p. 3.
Arap Moi, who had been in power since 1978. Majimboism, originally intended as a form of federal regionalism, was turned into a quest for ethnically exclusive territority and became a vehicle for ethnic mobilization. Political campaigners from the Rift Valley’s pastoralist groups, who became known under the pseudo-ethnic acronym of KAMATUSA (Kalenjin, Maasai, Turkana, and Samburu), played a central role in pushing the idea. Majimboism was propagated as an alternative to multi-partyism, which was seen as a threat to KAMATUSA interests. Within weeks after the first rallies were started, violence erupted against non-KAMATUSA minorities in the Rift Valley, particularly against Kikuyu, who were branded as aliens and land grabbers. The clashes, which were instigated by political leaders and carried out mostly by young men in traditional pastoralist dress, claimed about 1,500 lives and displaced an estimated 300,000 people between 1991 and 1993. The electoral violence of 1997 largely followed the same pattern.

In contrast to their ‘formerly passive role in national affairs’, pastoralists were prominently involved in these politicized clashes of the 1990s. Militant majimboism, which stirred up the violence of the 1990s as well as the post-election violence in 2008, also has repercussions for more localized conflicts between pastoralists. It fuels conflicts over control and access to territories that had formerly been used in a more flexible and less exclusive manner. This is of course by no means the only explanation for the ongoing clashes in Kenya’s arid north, but it is a factor of growing importance. This is aptly summarized by Günther Schlee:

[In the late 1990s and around 2000] local patterns of conflict among pastoralists in the north were influenced by national politics or regional politics in other parts of Kenya. In order to mobilize the government for their own causes, local leaders had to find out which degree of ethnicization had become usual and subsequently legitimate elsewhere. There the ethnicization of politics and the tolerance towards or even promotion of ethnic violence proceeded in giant steps, and the idea that every group had a homeland and the right to expel minorities by force gained ground.

In 2009, an initiative to review the existing constituency boundaries added fresh fuel to these patterns of territorial conflict. An Interim Independent Boundary Review Commission (IIBRC) was assigned the task of approving the physical boundaries of the 210 existing constituencies and of suggesting an optimal number of constituencies. The IIBRC, known as the Ligale Commission after its chairman Andrew Ligale,
toured the country to meet with representatives of the existing constituencies and listen to their views and suggestions. These regional meetings immediately proved to be highly conflictual. The Commission’s report finally suggested the creation of an additional 80 new constituencies, a decision that turned out to be ‘legal and political land mine’. The announcement of 20 new constituencies in pastoralist areas, for example, immediately sparked heavy protests by residents of areas that felt discriminated against or ignored by the Commission’s suggestion. Through processes such as these, pastoralist groups became increasingly enmeshed within the politicized violence surrounding Kenya’s troubled decentralization debate.

**Raiding, territory, and boundaries in East Pokot**

East Pokot is a newly created district in the Kenyan Rift Valley Province, located in the semi-arid to arid savannah plains north of Lake Baringo. The district is almost exclusively inhabited by the Southern Nilotic speaking Pokot and belongs to the poorest areas of Kenya, characterized by rapid population growth, weak infrastructure, and high illiteracy rates. The Pokot of the Baringo area have led a fully mobile pastoralist lifestyle since they expanded into the area during the nineteenth century. In the lowland plains toward the arid north people are still predominantly pastoral nomads. The areas stretching from the shores of Lake Baringo toward the highlands, however, have witnessed a profound change from pastoralism to sedentary agro-pastoralism. Since the 1980s rain-fed cultivation has emerged as a dominant livelihood in pockets of the well-watered highlands. During the past decade, the transition to agriculture

36. Lucas Barasa, ‘Proposed constituencies could force political bigwigs to shift base’, *Daily Nation*, 19 November 2010, pp. 8–9. In 2011 the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) was established to carry on the tasks of the Ligale Commission. The processes of readjusting the administrative boundaries threatened to deadlock the implementation of the new constitution and the upcoming general elections of 2012.
37. As result of the constitutional reform, the district was recently integrated into Baringo County. My research on East Pokot is inspired and informed by previous work on the area carried out by members of the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, Cologne. The writings of Michael Bollig, who worked in the area from 1987–9 and did some shorter studies in the 1990s, and Matthias Österle, who did a re-study in 2003–5, provide an interesting and valuable long-term perspective on the changing nature of cattle raiding in the area.
accelerated and spread into the lowland areas. Trends of land-use change have been intensified by the implementation of community-based wildlife conservation projects in the area. The resulting land-use patterns have formed a landscape marked by growing fragmentation and habitat loss.

Some two decades ago, Michael Bollig asserted that ‘Pokot raids do not aim at expanding their territory’ and that administrative borders did not constitute issues of conflict. Raids were interpreted as driven by ideals of male prestige, high bride prices and the influx of modern arms. By the mid-1990s, the former buffer zones at the fringes of Pokot land that separated the Pokot from their neighbours had ceased to exist. They were gradually encroached on by a steadily growing population or shifted toward the neighbouring territories as a result of constant clashes. At the same time, the character of cattle raiding changed fundamentally, with acts of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and extreme violence becoming increasingly evident in relation to more traditional cattle raids. While Michael Bollig and Matthias Österle describe these shifts in performance in great detail, drawing on the emotional and ritual significance of raiding, amongst other aspects, their analysis suggests that Pokot rustling had no intrinsic politicized dimension until the late 1990s. From then on, raiding gradually changed and, as outlined above, warriors from Pokot were involved, alongside warriors from other pastoral groups, in attacks on agricultural settlers in Laikipia. A Pokot community elder, asked about these conflicts, explained:

Not only the Pokot. Even the Samburu have understood that there is a way to tell the government to tell these people [current land owners] to evacuate and surrender the farms to the locals. That before that one, there has to be a conflict. You see? There should be a conflict between the indigenous and the owners of the land … Before the government

42. Michael Bollig, personal communication, 10 April 2012.
44. Michael Bollig and Matthias Österle, “We turned our enemies into baboons”: warfare, ritual and pastoral identity among the Pokot of northern Kenya’ in Aparna Rao, Michael Bollig, and Monika Böck (eds), The Practice of War: Production, reproduction and communication of armed violence (Berghahn Books, New York, NY, 2007), pp. 23–51.
approaches the owners of the ranches to sell their land, there should be a recorded conflict between the owners of the ranches and the locals for a certain period.\footnote{Interview, Pokot community elder, Churo (East Pokot), 5 November 2010.}

This quote, which echoes Günther Schlee’s analysis cited above, clearly shows the connection between raiding and politics, and hints at the profound recent changes in Pokot warfare. Today, the Pokot have hostile relations with almost all of their neighbours. Much of the time, administrative boundaries and the allocation of infrastructure are the bones of contention, and sometimes violence is openly fuelled by political incitement. In what follows, I briefly describe the range of conflicts along the district boundaries.

In the south-west of their district, conflict is concentrated in the village of Loruk, where Pokot and Tugen live. Three districts meet at this ribbon-built village, and the boundary lines are unclear, which causes tension because both groups suspect each other of encroaching on their own land. Furthermore, the Pokot claim their right to a primary school that was allegedly built for them in 1984 but later was assigned to Baringo Central where Tugen are the majority. Relatively solid political relations between Tugen and Pokot leaders have prohibited larger-scale violent conflicts until recently, probably due to the fact that former Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi is a Tugen. In November 2012 tensions between Pokot and Tugen erupted, resulting in several casualties, the closure of schools, and the displacement of an estimated 6,000 people from their homes in the Marigat area.\footnote{Mathew Ndanyi, ‘Kenya: 6,000 flee home as Pokot-Tugen tensions rise’, \textit{The Star} [Nairobi], \url{http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/201211060168.htm} (last accessed 5 November 2012).} Marigat District Commissioner Saul Muywaya, quoted in a newspaper report, said that he was afraid of a worsening of the conflict in the run-up to the general elections of 2013, because ‘the attacks were not mere cattle rustling but well-calculated plans to displace one community from land in the area’.\footnote{Ibid.}

The western margins of Pokot territory have witnessed comparatively recent and still ongoing conflict with the neighbouring Marakwet, which first erupted in the early stages of re-establishing multi-party democracy in 1992 and led to massive displacements of Marakwet.\footnote{Ruto Pkalya, Mohamud Adan, and Isabella Masinde, ‘Conflict in northern Kenya: a focus on the internally displaced conflict victims in northern Kenya’ (Report, Intermediate Technology Group Eastern Africa, Nairobi, 2003), p. 11.} The conflict, which has strong political connotations, involved extremely violent attacks, such as the Murkutwo massacre in which Pokot raiders killed 56 people in March 2001. Dave Eaton mentions a report by the Kenya Human Rights Commission describing these attacks as part of a large-scale political
programme of the Kalenjin leaders ‘to keep opposition at bay ... ahead of the 2002 general elections’. A clear hint as to the political dimensions of the conflict is the quick agreement to a peace accord after the elections, which can easily be explained by shifting power relations in Nairobi following the end of Moi’s presidency in 2002. The fact that the Marakwet MP Linah Kilimo was appointed as a minister in Kibaki’s new cabinet led the Pokot leaders to give in and actively engage in peace negotiations.

The conflict with the Turkana, who live in the areas north of East Pokot, is among the oldest conflicts in northern Kenya. A new wave of conflict escalated in 1995 when Turkana tried to occupy part of Pokot country and were defeated ‘devastatingly’. Since then, the conflict has turned more and more openly into a boundary dispute that, in early 2012, involves mutual killings and large-scale displacements on an almost daily basis. One of the hotspots of violence is the village of Kapedo. A memorandum to the IIBRC describes in great detail the Pokot claims to the place, and particularly to the primary school, supposedly built for them by Finnish missionaries but ‘mischievously’ transferred to Turkana District in 1985. In the last decade the Pokot have conquered territory that stretches far into former Turkana territory and turned Kapedo into a virtual Turkana bridgehead, which, according to many Pokot, had to be eliminated. Matthias Österle mentions that at times Pokot snipers shot at Turkana who dared to leave the village in search of water or firewood. Only recently, new factors have emerged to fuel the ongoing conflicts along the Pokot–Turkana border. Successful oil-prospecting missions and a proposed geothermal power plant increase the desirability of areas of land that are claimed by both sides.

51. For the historical background see McCabe, Cattle Bring Us to Our Enemies; Bollig, Die Krieger der Gelben Gewehre.
52. Bollig and Österle, “‘We turned our enemies into baboons’”, p. 26.
55. Österle, Innovation und Transformation.
For many years, the Samburu living in the north-east of Pokot territory were brothers-in-arms with the Pokot in a common fight against the Turkana, particularly in the Baragoi area, where warriors of both groups repeatedly attacked Turkana households in a conflict that was politically instigated in order to ‘disenfranchise “enemy” community voters during electioneering period’.\(^{57}\) In 2006, however, war also erupted between the Pokot and the Samburu. The bone of contention in this case was the planned implementation of a wildlife conservancy in an area that had formerly been used by both groups without dispute, but which now attracted exclusive claims. The conflict eventually spread to Laikipia, where Pokot and Samburu herders had been moving into vacated areas since the mid-1990s to make use of available pasture. Provoked by tensions around the proposed wildlife conservancy, they fought each other over land claims.\(^{58}\) These fights reached a sad climax in the massacre of Kanampiu village in September 2009, when a Pokot attack led to 35 casualties.\(^{59}\) According to a Pokot elder, this massacre was meant as an example. The Samburu were explicitly warned not to move their settlements into a zone claimed by Pokot.\(^{60}\) Kanampiu, the settlement in question, was eradicated in the attack.

This brings us to the last centre of conflict – Mukutani, an area in the south-western margins of Pokot territory, which I will describe in greater detail. In March 2005, Pokot warriors started a series of raids against the neighbouring IlChamus, killing several people and stealing more than 2,000 head of cattle.\(^{61}\) The massive attacks, which were carried out on a daily basis for several weeks, forced the IlChamus to withdraw and leave large parts of the area as no man’s land. Only massive army operations stopped the Pokot from further displacing the IlChamus. According to my interviews, in the years before this incident relations between Pokot and IlChamus had been amicable. So what had happened?

The IlChamus community had applied to the Electoral Commission of Kenya for recognition as a separate constituency.\(^{62}\) This would have

58. Greiner, ‘Unexpected consequences’.
60. Interview, Pokot community elder, Churo (East Pokot), 26 July 2011.
62. Their claim was based on the fact that they are an ethnic minority and thus politically underrepresented in the existing constituency (Baringo Central) where the majority of inhabitants are Tugen. The case was taken to the Kenya High Court, which ruled in favour of the IlChamus community in December 2006. In February 2010 they applied to the IIBRC to split Baringo Central constituency in order to create an Ilchamus constituency. By November 2010 the issue was back in court. Daily Nation, ‘Ilchamus Back in Court Over Constituency’ 24 November 2010, <http://www.allafrica.com/stories/201011250606.html>
improved their position significantly within the district and it would have involved the cementing of an administrative boundary between the IIChamus and the Pokot. The IIChamus were warned by Pokot leaders not to insist on the creation of their own constituency, and Österle writes that the Pokot warriors were given presents of ammunition and money by political leaders to attack their neighbours.⁶³ A Pokot chief of a neighbouring area aptly summarized this:

The raids that took place in the year 2005 were linked with the boundary problem. The Pokot wanted to fight the Njemps and push them back to Kiserian, far from that place [Mukutani], because they saw that the government is not helping them there.⁶⁴

The conflict between the Pokot and IIChamus at Mukutani has its historical precedents. Mukutani nowadays is a village on the banks of the Mukutani River, one of the region’s few perennial sources of water. In 1907 the colonial government established an administrative post there to arbitrate competing claims for land and water between both groups.⁶⁵ The post was deserted soon thereafter, but competition over the area remained. Although the Pokot mostly used the pastures north of the river, they continued to cross the river to graze and also settle.⁶⁶ In 1988, President Moi, who was also the area’s MP, shifted the boundary of IIChamus land 13 kilometres across the river into Pokot land. This, my Pokot informants assume, was meant to be a favour for their political support. At the time, fear of Moi’s reaction prevented overt conflicts over this contentious issue. When Moi lost power in 2002, these tensions resurfaced.⁶⁷

Again an infrastructural component is part of the quarrel. In 1978 the Full Gospel Church built a primary school and a dispensary in Mukutani. The Pokot narratives concerning these are aptly summarized in their memorandum to the Ligale Commission:


⁶³. Österle, Innovation und Transformation, p. 211.
⁶⁴. Interview, Pokot chief, Churo (East Pokot), 26 April 2011.

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Through the Pokot generosity, they permitted establishment of a mission school, church and dispensary in the Pokot Territory. The Pokot people accommodated their neighbours in sharing the services offered by the church, school and the dispensary. This was later abused and became one of the most controversial sources of conflict between the neighbouring communities. The Njemps community claims is a classical case of a proverbial camel which was accommodated and later wanted to evict its host.  

According to most Pokot I talked to, the boundary between Pokot and IlChamus in the area under dispute is the River Mukutani. The above cited memorandum, however, which was drafted by the political elite, makes a different claim. According to this document, the only acceptable boundary lies within present day IlChamus territory, about fifteen kilometres south of the river. Meanwhile, the raids against the IlChamus have continued and large areas east of Lake Baringo continue to be no man's land. Some families, however, have started to resettle in the village of Mukutani to practise farming along the river. They came as farmers, leaving their livestock some thirty kilometres behind at the village of Kiserian, where they had fled after the clashes in 2005. But arable land has emerged as a new source of tension in an area where pasture has been the prime resource and cause of conflict for over a century. A growing number of Pokot and IlChamus have started cultivating along the banks of River Mukutani. The river provides some possibilities for irrigation, but land is getting scarce now. The new conflict surfaced early last year, at the beginning of the growing season when all the villagers rushed to prepare their own cultivation plots. This season, residents of Mukutani village told me, the Pokot destroyed irrigation channels that lead to areas cultivated by the IlChamus.

In September 2011, I observed a peace meeting between the IlChamus and the Pokot in Mukutani. The meeting was facilitated by the local administration following the killing of an IlChamus herder. At the meeting, a Pokot elder rose and expressed his contentment that the IlChamus have finally returned to Mukutani. He deplored the fact that they came without their livestock, however, and asked them to bring their herds with them. This caused great discomfort among the IlChamus, and one of their elders spoke out: ‘We will not do so’, he said, ‘because if we bring back our livestock then you can raid and displace us again!’

This brief overview of the conflicts surrounding East Pokot clearly shows that most of the current violent interactions between the Pokot and their neighbours are related to highly politicized negotiations over land, boundaries, or votes. These conflicts, however, are fought out by young men who do not necessarily follow political aims, but are likely to be

68. ‘Memorandum presented by East Pokot leaders’.
69. Anderson, Eroding the Commons.
motivated by cultural and economic factors. I want to emphasize that I do not see the Pokot as the main aggressors, let alone as ‘the region’s most formidable and battle-hardened ethnic war machine’. The patterns of violence described here refer to a particular case that nevertheless represents the dominant dynamics driving political struggles in the Rift Valley, in Maasai-land, and in the pastoralist areas in northern Kenya.

Raiding for the boundary: decentralization, subdivision, and territorial expansion

About three decades ago, Serge Tornay noted that there is ‘no conscious, explicit territorial strategy’ behind pastoral warfare. This view was shared by many colleagues in his time and after. Viewed in the light of current trends, however, tremendous changes in the drivers of such warfare become obvious. Today, territorial expansion and boundary adjustments are at the core of many, if not most, conflicts. The expansionist tendencies now pursued through the act of raiding recall accounts of pre-colonial warfare among pastoralists. As outlined at the beginning of this article, many authors suggest that in the past raiding was used as a means of territorial expansion, until this was contained by the colonial administrations. In contrast to the current dynamics, raiding without territorial aspirations might be considered to have been a product of the colonial order. It began to revert to a semblance of its original form once the state lost the capacity to control boundaries, which in Kenya was noticeable when Daniel arap Moi’s grip on power began to fade.

While there are many possible drivers of this shift toward territorial expansion, such as demographic growth and depletion of resources, my discussion here is more modest and seeks to highlight the dynamics that lead to the centrality of administrative boundaries in the recent conflicts.

73. But see Schlee, ‘Territorialising ethnicity’, p. 7, who notes that the pre-colonial Worr Libin (Boran) wars of the nineteenth century did not aim at territorial expansion.
In pastoralist areas, increasing settlement, privatization, and fragmentation of land have sensitized the populations to the issue of administrative boundaries. The political situation described at the outset of this article has greatly contributed to the scramble for land and made people realize that boundaries become more and more important in limiting or enabling access to resources. Those resources are no longer limited to pasture and water. As the case of East Pokot shows, modern infrastructure projects often become centrepieces of conflict, as, increasingly, do fertile land and irrigation areas. The structure of Kenya’s administration, which is largely based on the colonial set-up, further fuels these conflicts. Administrative units are generally coterminous with ethnic names and parliamentary constituencies are aligned with ethnic boundaries. Populations who are living outside of what is perceived to be their homeland are easily denounced and perceived as strangers, and easily excluded from the political-economic patronage networks within their ‘host’ areas.

The colonial boundaries were never set up with the intent to organize and ensure adequate service provision, let alone fair political representation. During the presidencies of Kenyatta and Moi this was not redressed. Instead, the public administration was turned into ‘a tool for political mobilization’. Politicians shifted territorial boundaries at will, as was the case in Mukutani, and the administration complied. Today, administrative boundaries in East Pokot and neighbouring areas are ill-defined, and in some cases overlapping. During my research it proved impossible to get hold of a list of the area’s current administrative units at the provincial administration in Nakuru. After Mwai Kibaki was elected as Kenya’s third President in 2002, the creation of new administrative units continued to be used as a campaign tool. East Pokot itself was created in this manner, shortly before the general elections of 2007. Since he came to power, Kibaki has almost tripled the number of districts. Subdivision, Schlee writes, is the current trend in Kenya. This is what the political

75. Similar developments can be observed along Kerio River, where irrigation projects increasingly become the focus of conflict, and where Pokot and Turkana fight over the Turkwell Gorge hydroelectric power plant. Interview, Samwel Musumba, Programmes Coordinator, Provincial Peace Forum, Nakuru, 13 September 2011.
77. This has been aggravated with the introduction of ‘Constituency Development Funds’ (CDFs) in 2003. CDFs have replaced the administration-based District Development Funds. Now the allocation of funds for development projects is directly linked to the MP of an area. This consolidates his position and enables him to discriminate against opponents. Günther Schlee, ‘Territorializing ethnicity: the imposition of a model of statehood on pastoralists in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia’, Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies (2011), pp. 1–18.
elites have asked for, and the government has been willing to comply in the effort to buy support.  

In the current conflicts in Kenya’s pastoralist areas, territorial reordering is a dominant motif and claims for boundary adjustments emerge as one of the central levers in these struggles. These conflicts clearly reflect the country’s experiences of violence since the early 1990s, particularly that of the post-election violence of 2008. As such they are part of Kenya’s troubled nation-building process. Unlike the post-election clashes in Central Kenya, however, the frequent violent incidents in the pastoral areas in northern Kenya are usually portrayed as traditional conflicts fuelled by the backward cultural practice of cattle rustling. In the remainder of this article I advance some provisional answers to the question of how raiding is connected to politics.

‘Silent politics’: cattle raiding and political machinations

While the political dimensions of inter-tribal violence are largely explicable, the nexus between political leaders and the actual raiders is much less clear. There is evidence that Kalenjin politicians were actively involved in the distribution of modern firearms to the Pokot in the mid-1990s. In some cases, such as in the attacks against the IlChamus, the actions of the raiders were openly instigated by politicians. Sometimes this is also reported in the media. Yet finding out exactly which politicians are involved has proved impossible. This does not come as a surprise because since the post-election crisis of 2008 and the subsequent prosecution of Kenyan politicians by the International Criminal Court (ICC), more public attention is being devoted to politicians instigating ethnic hatred.

In private conversations, people mostly named area MPs and local councillors as culprits. Both are elected by the public and have to compete hard for their positions and balance different claims. Bollig, for example, describes how MP hopefuls were judged according to their capacity to guarantee organized provision of relief food, and at the time of my fieldwork, the appropriate usage of Constituency Development Funds was a recurring issue. In order to safeguard their positions, MPs must shield raiders from prosecution, while at the same time fearing that their raids may lead to a devastating government response and disarmament.

81. For a similar observation see Boye and Kaarhus, ‘Competing claims and contested boundaries’.
82. McCabe, Cattle Bring Us to Our Enemies, p. 90.
campaigns by the security forces, which they must also prevent. I was repeatedly told that, particularly during electoral campaigns, peace negotiations are usually avoided by politicians, because any concessions they make are easily used against them by their competitors; during my fieldwork, no active politician, either councillor or MP, was publicly engaged in peace negotiations. Pressured by the Geothermal Development Cooperation, the sitting MP of East Pokot, for example, agreed at a meeting in Naivasha in 2011 to peacefully share the geothermal resources of the disputed Silale area with the Turkana. This agreement, however, was never communicated to the general population in the region, where tensions between Pokot and Turkana over this matter are high. Whether the underlying rationale for this behaviour is based on the fear of losing support in the community, or perhaps the expectation of some benefits that might result from further clashes, is difficult to tell.

Regarding the reshaping of administrative boundaries, the political elite in East Pokot are in two minds. A smaller faction argues that the Pokot might benefit if members of their ethnic group live outside their own administrative boundaries, while the majority want to extend their boundaries in order to include the Pokot now living outside areas currently defined as Pokot land. This situation is not publicly debated, however, and a deeper examination of this matter is beyond the scope of this article. In any case, the politics in the area are strictly defined in ethnic terms, as Eaton notes, and politicians are ‘under enormous pressure to support “their” people’. In the game plans of local politicians, territorial gains mean more voters and increased political esteem locally— even though, nationally, those openly endorsing or even tacitly approving such tactics attract vociferous criticism. Nevertheless, given the unpredictability of party affiliations and coalitions, a strong local foothold is the sine qua non for a political career.

In this context, it is also important to mention that, at least in East Pokot, most politicians are former herdboys, and are familiar with the dynamics of violence. One active politician, once a cattle rustler himself, confirmed that during the 1990s booty from raiding was used to finance political campaigns, and that today continuous raiding is particularly used to push people out of places that are perceived to have an economic benefit. Livestock raiding is an excellent strategy to this end for several reasons. First, it undermines their enemies’ livelihoods to such an extent that it very often results in large-scale displacement; second, acquisition

85. Interview, Samburu politician, Maralal, 29 August 2011.
86. Interview, GDC representative, Nakuru, 12 September 2011.
87. Interview, Pokot community elder, Churo (East Pokot), 26 July 2011.
89. Interview, Pokot politician, Nakuru, 12 September 2011.
of livestock provides sufficient incentive in itself; and, third, in the light of this fact it is very easy for politicians to blame cattle raiding on forces beyond their control. Yet there seems to be no clear chain of command between politicians and raiders, and therefore the raiders can hardly be described as militias in an emerging system of warlordism, which appears to be the situation in West Pokot.  

Looking at the raiders’ motivations reveals a mixed picture. Some warriors, particularly in Amaya, an area that has witnessed recent clashes, were fairly explicit about boundary quarrels as an underlying motive, which indicates that these warriors perceive themselves as members of competing territorialized social units. Territorial gains are nowadays more enduring and valuable than a few stolen cattle, as new territories open up more options for grazing and cultivation and lessen internal competition. Asked about their reasons for fighting with the Samburu, one man told me the following:

The Samburu say that their boundary with us is the River Amaya. And we, as Pokot, we know our boundary is in a place called Longewan, on the top of the hill. The Samburu, they have a problem with the boundary. But before, we had no trouble with the boundaries because everybody was grazing the way he felt like because there was no issue of boundaries.

With obvious pride, and clearly with no qualms about being overheard by other villagers, another young man in Amaya said: ‘My name is Tomele. This name was given to me because I killed someone. What we are fighting over with the Samburu is the boundary.’ This hints at prestige and symbolic capital for successful raiders, a motive that still is powerful, particularly amongst those youth who have no chance of social advancement through formal education. In another area, young men who revealed themselves to be raiders were quick to reject political motivations as irrelevant and pointed instead to their poverty and marginalization as reasons for raiding. Furthermore, weapons, and particularly ammunition, indispensable for self-defence in these violence-prone areas, are expensive and need to be compensated: ‘We normally sell the animals we have in the homestead to buy the ammunition’, one warrior told me, ‘and if I go for a raid and get enough animals, I go and sell some to buy some more. This is how it operates with our guns.’ Bollig describes these dynamics in much detail, and also points out the underlying cultural and emotive patterns.

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91. Interview, Pokot warrior, Plesian (East Pokot), 19 April 2011.
92. Interview, Pokot warrior, Amaya (East Pokot), 27 July 2011.
93. Interview, Pokot warrior, Chepungus (East Pokot), 29 April 2011.
94. Interview, Pokot warrior, Plesian (East Pokot), 19 April 2011.
For the purposes of this article, it suffices to acknowledge that many raiders follow their own agendas, driven by issues such as poverty, revenge, and the desire for prestige or quick money, and that therefore there are enough young men in East Pokot willing to raid their neighbours.

Publicly, the political elites, government officials, and community elders in East Pokot depoliticize cattle raiding almost by default. They accuse young, undisciplined, and illiterate herders as the only perpetrators of raids. This has a positive side-effect in that, as a consequence, claims to more and better infrastructure are made as the only promising path to stop raiding. In interviews, boundary issues and territorial claims were mentioned only hesitatingly as underlying factors in raiding, and their mention at all required a relatively high level of trust between me and my informants. Information on political instigation, or even links between raiders and political leaders, were revealed at best vaguely. The exact nexus between politics and raiding therefore remains uncertain.

How, then, does cattle raiding fit within the scheme of political machinations? Even relatively low-level tension can prompt raiders to attack. Political leaders can amplify such tensions intentionally by spreading vague information and partial truths. An even more direct instigation of violence occurs through what a Pokot elder described as ‘silent politics’. According to him, leaders, particularly MPs and MP candidates, go to areas of Pokot land where the army and police are not present. There they tell the people that the so-and-so group is taking away Pokot land and needs to be stopped. They promise political protection for the raiders, and there are persistent rumours that they also distribute ammunition or money among the warriors. In this situation, the raiders come to feel that an attack is approved by the community as well as by their political leaders, and that they can expect no punishment or other social sanctions for their actions. This pattern, which was confirmed in many informal conversations, echoes what Fleisher describes for cattle raiders in Kuria, Tanzania, where inter-clan tensions and warfare provide a window of opportunity for cattle raiding.

For the political leaders it is very convenient ‘to hide behind the veil of “traditional conflicts”’ and many are actively working at preserving this image. A recent Kenya National Assembly debate on the problem of

96. See, for example, in Kibiwott Koross, ‘Learning comes to a standstill as cattle raiders call the shots’, Daily Nation, 15 July 2008, p. 30.
97. For a critique see Eaton, ‘The business of peace’.
98. Interview, Pokot community elder, Loruk (East Pokot), 11 August 2011.
99. Interview, Pokot community elder, Churo (East Pokot), 26 July 2011.
100. Fleisher, “War is good for thieving!”.
cattle rustling and insecurity in the pastoral areas of northern Kenya serves as a useful illustration: although many speakers came from areas affected by cattle raiding, they described cattle rustling as a backward-oriented cultural practice fuelled by tendencies toward criminal commercialization. Mr Lesrima, MP for Samburu West and Assistant Minister of State for Provincial Administration and Internal Security, for example, made the following point: ‘We know that pastoralists have no boundaries in East Africa.’ Instead of elaborating on the connection between politics, questions over land rights, and raiding, he blamed unspecified NGOs for fuelling cattle rustling in order to access funds for peace-building measures. Mr Langat, a Kalenjin MP from the Rift Valley, held that cattle rustling is a purely cultural issue, and Mr Magwanga, MP for a constituency in Nyanza Province, was quick to second that ‘cattle rustling should not be politicized’.102

Conclusion: toward a political perspective on cattle raiding

With respect to recent clashes in Isiolo, Tana River, and Moyale, Mzalendo Kibunjia, chairman of the Kenyan National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) informed the Kenyan broadcasting station Capital FM that the conflicts in northern Kenya are ‘politically motivated’ and should not be ‘dismissed as conflict over water, pasture, and cattle rustling’.103

This article confirms this perspective by demonstrating that much of the current violence in pastoralist areas in Kenya is indeed primarily fuelled by politicized dynamics, whereby the motives of the raiders and those of local politicians form an unholy alliance. There are clear continuities between the politicized violence in central Kenya, which found its temporary peak in the post-election violence of 2008, and the ongoing tensions and clashes in northern Kenya’s pastoralist areas. Polemically, one could say that the scourges of the modern Kenyan nation state – political tribalism and majimboism – have penetrated to even the most marginal areas. In these conflicts, contested boundaries and issues of entitlement to resources play a central role. Some authors have emphasized the crucial role of property rights in this context.104 It remains to be seen whether the recent endeavours by the IEBC to clarify and re-establish the administrative boundaries will eventually enhance more peaceful relations in the area.

This article also demonstrates that established interpretations, be they cultural, ecological, or even climate-related, are no longer adequate on their own. Attempts to understand the current conflicts require the use of approaches that are sensitive to the political implications of cattle raiding and view the pastoralist areas more in the context of the struggles over democratization, decentralization, and nation building that are taking place in Kenya. In the light of these dynamics, it appears at best problematic to associate cattle rustling with allegedly timeless cultural practices or to blame it on climate change. Both might influence the actor’s perceptions and can easily be used to legitimate ongoing and future atrocities.105