

Identity politics and Ethnic claims among the Pastoral Pokot of Baringo, Kenya

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Abstract

Pastoralism is a mode of production that relies on the exploitation of livestock and their products as their main subsistence strategy. It is practiced in the marginal geographical areas in Kenya. This economic activity supports people in ASALs and in the urban centers who depend on livestock products such as meat, milk, butter and cheese. This economic activity has been facing challenges since the colonial times. The promulgation of Kenya's 2010 constitution led to the introduction of the new form of governance. For the first time in Kenya the constitution introduced the devolved system of governance. This decentralized system came with devolution of powers and services to the common person. Although this system of governance was received by majority of people with a lot of optimism, the pastoralist communities received the new constitution with mixed reactions. Some had hoped that it would be a turning point in addressing the historical injustices of marginalization and underdevelopment. While other pastoralist communities hoped that with the devolved system they would benefit from services such as protection against environmental hazards, access to clean water, good roads, provision of veterinary and extension services, access to healthcare services. However, almost ten years after the promulgation of the 2010 constitution, these hopes seem to be disappearing. This study aims at looking into this new development. The research will examine the extent to which devolution has helped the Pokot pastoralists in terms of service delivery and to analyze how the County government of Baringo addressed the challenges experienced in East Pokot sub-county. This study relied on secondary texts, archival materials and field data.

Brief introduction of the Pokot

Unlike most African ethnic communities who trace their origins chronologically to a common ancestry, accounts of Pokot origin are vague and mostly dependent on oral sources provided by the community's elders (Bollig et al 2013). Going by the oral sources, Pokot were previously called Suk in the literature and by outsiders during colonial times. During the colonial period, the Pokot were called "Suk" by Europeans. For instance Stewart (1950) referred to the Pokot as the Suk. To some Pokot, the older designation was a reminder of an era in which Africans lacked the power to name themselves; to others, it represents the clever ruse of a forebear who outwitted powerful strangers by disguising his identity.

In the first perspective, "Suk" is an ethnic slur that Europeans borrowed from the Maasai, who denigrated non-pastoral pursuits; the name is said to derive from *chok*, a short sword or staff used by Pokot cultivators to till the soil. Similarly, according to ethnographers, they classified Pokot as Kalenjin people of Nandi speaking community of the Southern Nilotic comprising of seven main sections, Pokot, Marakwet, Elgeiyo and Tugen (Huntingford 1953b). In the second perspective, a Pokot elder, when questioned by Europeans, referred to himself as "Musuk," a term for the nearby tree similarly, to the Maasai the Suk or Pokoot (pronounced Pokaut) is a "Maasai name which is understood to mean 'the ignorant people. Pokoot is said to be the Suk name for 'agriculturalists living in the highlands'. It is certain that the Suk of this district, now entirely pastoral, were formerly very largely agricultural" (KNA, PC/RVP/2/7/2 Baringo District Annual Report 1929, page 3).

Methodology

This article is based on the study that was carried out by the researcher on Continuity and Change in the Practice of Pastoralism among the Pokot of Baringo County 1920-2017. This study was mainly qualitative in nature. It critically sought to analyze the role of County governments as agents of development. A qualitative approach sought to understand historical contexts that have informed the marginalization of the pastoralist Pokot. This study adopted two methods of acquiring empirical data. These included documentary data and in-depth interviews with key informants. Secondary data was widely consulted and analyzed to provide the initial data. The researcher perused through various libraries within Nairobi and beyond and the Kenya National archives for written data on identity politics and ethnic claims. Secondary data included written sources such as published books, journals, theses, newspapers and periodicals. These were procured from various libraries in Nairobi. More secondary data was acquired from other external libraries within and outside the continent through the online platforms. Other online journals accessible through internet provided additional secondary information.

Oral interviews also provided important source of information for this research. In order to get relevant information on identity politics and ethnic claims, the researcher chose to interview people who had served as administrators before and current administrators of different departments in Baringo County. Instruments for primary data collection included, questionnaires, and focused group discussion guides (FGDs) and interview schedules. The issues examined revolved around economic, political and historical contexts informing the past and present arguments around ethnic claims.

This qualitative data from the above sources allowed the researcher to closely scrutinize the findings from various sources. All the data gathered from various sources formed the basis of analysis on identity politics and ethnic claims among the Pokot of Baringo County. Data analysis and processing were done according to the research title. Data was classified according to its content and the historical time frame when events and developments took place. Primary data was scrutinized against the evidence obtained from the archives and field interviews to ensure validity of the information. On the other hand information from FGDs and interview schedules was placed under various themes and scrutinized to validate it with information from the archives and secondary sources. This data was then written ready for presentation as findings.

Study Area

The study was carried out in Baringo County of the Republic of Kenya and more specifically East Pokot Sub-County. East Pokot is one of the Sub-Counties in Baringo County. It was formerly known as East Pokot District. Today it is the home of some estimated 133,000 Pokot, covering about 4,500 km². The topography of the area is rugged and characterized by semi-arid savanna plains and mountain ranges. The sub-county is exclusively inhabited by the Southern Nilotic speaking Pokot and belongs to the poorest areas of Kenya. The region is characterized by rapid population growth, weak infrastructure and high illiteracy rates. It lies between the longitudes 35 30' and 36 30' East and between 0 10' South and 1 40'. (KNBS Population and Housing 2013).

Tracing the History of Ethnicity among the Pokot

According to Sandbrook, (1985) Ethnicity can be traced back to the colonial times when the colonial masters established local governments and administrative borders in terms of linguistic and cultural orientation. Although this began in Berlin in 1884 when the European Countries demarcated Africa into different territories that came to be known as states where Kenya was among the states that emanated from the Berlin conference. Several ethnic nations with different social, political, economic and cultural spheres were among those put under one territory known as Kenya (Rosenberg 2004). In March 1902 the Eastern province of Uganda was transferred to East African Protectorate and the area transferred was divided into four districts namely: Mau, Baringo, Suk and Nandi (Woodward1902).

The consequences of merging different ethnic groups did not have negative impacts immediately because these different ethnic groups merged together worked hand in glove to eject the colonial masters. In East Pokot for example the Kolloa affray of 1950-1954 was practical example which different ethnic groups worked together under one umbrella of Dini Ya Msambwa to fight the colonizers.

In his preaching's Kipkoech promised his followers eternal life, freedom from European, reversion to primitive customs, immunity from gunfire, immunity from captures, immunity from sickness and relief from blindness, increased fertility for old men and sterility for women. His teachings made him to have a large following but brought him into conflict with the colonial administrators. He was warned twice by the district commissioner A.B Simpson to stop the sect but he refused. While Simpson was drafting the final letter to Kipkoech, making one last surrender demand accompanied by the incoming DC, two police officers and forty armed African officers, a crowd of Dini ya Musabwa followers emerged from the bush carrying spears and began dancing for Simpson and his group something that led to what came to be called Kolloa Affray (Reed, 1954).

This led to the marginalization of the Pokot. A government levy was stationed in Pokot for two years at Pokot expenses. Similarly there was reduction of Hut tax for the Tugen to Ksh. 6 and a simultaneous increase for Pokot hut Tax to Ksh. 12 per annum. It was decided that each month the various locations would contribute approximately 250-300 cattle. The total number of cattle eventually collected were 5,000 and when sold to the Kenya Meat Commission realized the sum of £8,980.35 (GOK 1954)

The whole incident led to concerted efforts by the colonial government to put the Pokot pastoralists of Baringo under tight government and security surveillance. As a result of this battle a Kenya police levy Force consisting of an Assistant Superintendent of Police, two European inspectors and 70 African other ranks was imposed immediately with headquarters at Nginyang some 35 miles from the battle field. The task set for the levy force was the disarmament of the East Suk, the enforcement of the fine imposed by government and of ensuring the performance of compulsory labour on public works such as roads and water supplies (KNA, PC/RVP/2/3/6 Baringo District Annual Report 1950).

Generally, government's response to the Kolloa incident had repercussions on Pokot pastoralism because the fine imposed on them by the government was to be paid in terms of livestock. This seemed to be a strategy of the government to enforce destocking rather than for punishment's sake. The full fine amounted to 5,000 head of cattle. In the words of the District Commissioner, it was noted that:

“The fine imposed by government is being levied in cattle and by the time the full 5,000 head has been removed, a great service towards destocking will have been rendered not only to East Suk, but to the District as a whole” (KNA, PC/RVP/2/3/6 Baringo District Annual Report 1950).

From the forgoing discussion the division of the country into different ethnic groups for easier administration by the colonial masters did not perpetuate negative ethnicity among the Africans but was seen as an advantage because different ethnic groups joined hands to fight a common enemy. This was particularly the case with Lukas Kipkoech who had sought asylum among the Abaluyia learnt the new religion and came back to Pokot strong and determined to evict the enemy from the native land.

Ethnic politics during the Post-Independence era

Although traditionally, conflicts arose due to pasture, land and water, these conflicts have shifted to another level. Now the conflicts that are witnessed are due to infrastructural projects. The Pokot of East Pokot share a county with the Tugen and Ilchamus. Due to their small population compared to the Tugen who are the majority, the governor comes from the Tugen community who are the largest ethnic group in Baringo County. This has made the East Pokot to feel marginalized in terms of project developments. The Pokot of East Pokot feel that the Tugen have a lion share in development projects. With this in mind it has led to ethnic hatred among the two ethnic communities (Bollig and Osterle 2013).

The 2010 constitution recognized the marginalized communities in Kenya and provided policy recommendations to restore their glory. Article 260 of the constitution defined marginalized communities as an indigenous community that has retained and maintained a traditional lifestyle and livelihood (GOK 2013). Hence the pastoral communities have experienced marginal in the integrated social and economic life of Kenya. The East Pokot fall into this category of marginalized group whereby the 2010 constitution sought to restore its lost glory.

At the national level, article 204(3) of the 2010 Constitution requires that the national government uses 0.5% of the national revenue to develop the marginalized areas under the umbrella of equalization fund. However, so far so good no penny was dispersed to aid in the development agendas of which it was meant to help. The pastoral Pokot of Baringo and the entire North western Kenya which the money was meant to help had not yet helped. Although this marginalization dates back to 1902 under District Ordinance Act of “closed districts” in which East Pokot of Baringo County has remained ignored (Mutsotso 2018).

Until 2010, there were no tarmac road in the pastoral Pokot region. There were few and distant non functional schools in an area that covers about 800km². Most schools had no government teachers. Between 2014-2016, the national Youth Service only recruited Tugen Youth to construct Bartabwa Yatya road that terminated at Pokot boundary and the pokot youth only employed after consisted violent protests against discrimination by the government (Mutsotso 2018). This showed the extent to which the Pokot have been marginalized and dominated by the virtue of being the minority in the county.

The role of devolution going as per the Bomas draft constitution was to strengthen national unity through devolution of powers, creation of more centers of decision making and development, promotion of local culture and institutions above all increasing public participation in public affairs. People felt alienated from the central government where power was mostly concentrated. The unitary form of government that has been operational since 1963, made smaller ethnic groups feel alienated from the “presidency” where it is believed having your man at the top means you will get trickling of services to you ethnic community where the top man happens to come from (Ghai,2008).

It was against this background that people wanted the restructuring of the government to incorporate all the ethnic groups living within the Kenyan borders. The 2010 constitution allowed for devolution of its functions and people felt happy that there would be increased participation among the communities at local level. However, those counties that happened to be heterogeneous such as Baringo continued to suffer marginalization from the larger ethnic groups that they were merged with.

Nearly ten years since then little has been done in terms of development and empowering the local communities. Among the services provided by the county government include; limited infrastructures for instance. Limited roads have been constructed, provision of water in some parts, few hospitals constructed far away and some few ECDE schools. Despite marginalization in the area, livestock market has been developed in East Pokot with the establishment of markets such as Nginyang market and kolloa market where Baringo government collects revenue from the sale of livestock.

The above statement is well captured by Sharman (2009) who notes that in Baringo County there were improvement in infrastructure or new construction witnessed but East Pokot received little attention. Additionally in terms of education he notes, out of 656 primary schools in Baringo County only 106 were in pokot area and out of 134 secondary schools in Baringo only 6 are located in East Pokot (2009).

Similarly, marginalization of the Pokot was witnessed in the recruitment and the posting of the Kenya police reserve (KPR). It was conducted in a discriminatory manner against the East Pokot whereby Turkana recruited were 200, Laikipia 200, Samburu 70, Tugen 293 and Marakwet 240 while non was recruited from the Pokot (Daily nation, April 13, pp11 2017)

Under the 2010 Constitution, governors have substantial responsibilities for administration and service delivery in areas such as education, health and transport, and significant fiscal resources transferred from the Centre. These constitute historic changes in the fiscal and administrative organization of the Kenyan state, the next question to ask among the Pokot of Baringo has devolution empowered local communities, has devolution brought service delivery closer to the people or has County government brought balance the relationship between the national and the County government. These were some of the questions that this study sought to answer.

According to an FGD, (3/07/2019) Pokot elders confirmed that they had not been getting a fair share from the County government of Baringo. This was because they were the minority ethnic group leading them to get fewer Posts in the County government leadership. This had also been reciprocated in the development agenda. Little development programmes had been directed towards this region. This marginalization makes the pastoral pokot hopes that devolution was to act as a corrective to the historical problems that had been witnessed in the Pastoral areas seem to be disappearing.

Conclusion

The East Pokot of Baringo County have remained ignored for a long period of time. Since the beginning they had pursued an agenda of uniting with their fellow folks the West Pokot but their desires had been met with the highest opposition from the government. Under the 2010 constitution the East Pokot were joined together with Tugen whereby they were the minority in Baringo County. That made them to suffer further due to their minimal population compared with the Tugen. Minimal services trickled down to their area from the county government of Baringo. This made the East Pokot to lag behind in terms of development. Similarly the East Pokot are viewed as rigid in their mode of production and in possession of fire-arms something that discourage the investors and NGOs to penetrate deeper and offer development assistance.

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