

Review

## **Changing Perspectives on Cattle Rustling along the Kenya-Uganda Border: The Karamojong-Turkana Nexus**

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**Abstract:** Cattle rustling along the Kenya-Uganda border, particularly in the Karamojong-Turkana nexus, has long been perceived as a cultural practice rooted in pastoralist tradition. However, emerging evidence suggests a significant shift in its nature, drivers, and implications. This study investigates the changing perspectives on cattle rustling in the region, arguing that what was once a communal practice for socio-cultural affirmation has evolved into a commercialized, militarized, and politically-influenced activity. Key factors contributing to this transformation include the proliferation of small arms, increased market demand for livestock, climate-induced resource competition, and the weakening of traditional governance structures. Adopting a desktop literature review design, this study systematically analyzed existing academic publications, policy reports, NGO documentation, government records, and media sources relevant to cattle rustling in East Africa. The literature review reveals significant gaps: most prior studies have narrowly focused on ethnic tensions or cultural traditions, with limited attention to contemporary security dynamics, cross-border governance, and regional development challenges. Additionally, there is insufficient analysis on the role of state institutions, transnational criminal networks, and environmental stressors in perpetuating the practice. Findings from the review indicate a paradigm shift in how cattle rustling is conceptualized, no longer merely a customary rite of passage but increasingly a livelihood strategy, organized crime, and a source of regional instability. Evidence points to the complicity of political actors, limited cross-border security cooperation, and marginalization of borderland communities as key enabling factors. Furthermore, youth involvement in cattle raids is often driven by socio-economic exclusion, lack of educational opportunities, and ideological shifts. The study recommends a multi-pronged approach: (1) strengthening bilateral mechanisms between Kenya and Uganda for coordinated border security; (2) revitalizing indigenous peacebuilding frameworks; (3) implementing cross-border socio-economic programs aimed at addressing root causes of youth radicalization and economic marginalization; and (4) integrating climate adaptation strategies to reduce resource-based conflicts. This research contributes to the broader discourse on borderland security, pastoralist conflict, and regional diplomacy by reframing cattle rustling as a multidimensional challenge requiring

integrated, transnational responses.

**Keywords:** Kenya- Uganda border, cattle rustling, cross-border security cooperation.

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## **Introduction**

Cattle rustling has deep roots in the socio-cultural aspects of pastoralist communities of Eastern Africa and has recently become a multifaceted and dynamic development and security challenge in Eastern Africa. This has been more so in the Karamojong-Turkana nexus along the Kenya-Uganda border. Cattle rustling has undergone a fundamental transformation, which was traditionally seen as a rite of passage, a mechanism of accumulating wealth, or a bargaining chip aimed at negotiating between clans. Recently, it has come to be integrated with business interests, organized crime, the proliferation of small arms, marginalization of states, and transnational insecurity. This paper explores these changing attitudes, arguing that cattle rustling must now be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that transcends its customary origins to encompass governance, security, and regional diplomacy issues.

Various studies worldwide have also highlighted the shift from traditional to modern modes of conflict practices, characterized by organized violence. As an illustration, Hendrickson et al. (1996) examined the evolution of pastoral disputes in East Africa due to market incorporation, political manipulation, and ecological strain. Similarly, Leff (2009) and Witsenburg & Adano (2009) noted that this violence is becoming increasingly active between youth militias, criminal networks, and transboundary dynamics, activities that can be likened to the alterations in the Horn of Africa. However, studies do not contextualize the local setting well and tend to generalize about pastoralist warfare and conflicts without discussing the local interaction, such as that of the Turkana and Karamojong people.

In the scramble of continents, there is the recognition of the African Union (AU) reports and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) frameworks that recognize the complexity of pastoral conflicts, which tend to be associated with climate change, weak governance, and porous borders (AU, 2015). For example, the AU Border Programme (AUBP) proposed better governance of the border territories and involving the local populations in peace maintenance. Nevertheless, these frameworks provide policy guidance, but there are limited empirical studies, and most of them do not take much consideration of localized data and examine grassroots processes in places like northern

Kenya and northeast Uganda. At the regional level, there has been increased literature on cattle rustling in Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia. An example was given by Mkutu (2008), who gave a seminal analysis on the issue of small arms and pastoralist conflict in the Kenya-Uganda borderland, where the dominant factor was a weak state presence and militarization. In the same breadth, Eaton (2010) reflected on the economic reasons that cattle rustling arose in Turkana.

In contrast, Akabwai and Ateyo (2007) gave an account of the human security consequences of such attacks in Karamoja. Nonetheless, previous research tends to consider or treat Turkana and Karamojong as independent categories or study them in national contexts, thus failing to consider the cross-border interdependencies that are pivotal in determining the cattle rustling dynamics. Also, there is little research on the effect of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms on how they have worn off or evolved in response to the contemporary social-political pressure. This paper helps fill the gaps since it analyses the changing landscape of cattle rustling in the Uganda border, that is, in the Turkana-Karamojong interface. It examines how the practice has changed into a customary norm to contemporary security issues, where the reason behind the practice has been motivated by commercial reasons, regional instability, and structural marginalization. The fundamental argument is that cattle rustling is no longer an activity that can be studied in a vacuum, without examining related topics, i.e., border diplomacy, disenfranchisement of the youth, and environmental stress. To accomplish this, the research relies on a desktop design with a literature review. The methodology entails the methodical gathering, interpreting, and synthesis of second-hand information found in the peer-reviewed scholarly literature, policy documents, government documents, NGO documents, and regional security briefings.

The critical analysis of the available sources is expected to help comprehend recurring themes, conceptual contradictions, and policy gaps. Such a structure is especially appropriate when one seeks to create an in-depth, theory-based concept of the topic without undergoing any field research, especially in the risky or otherwise difficult-to-reach areas. Finally, the study has implications for human security, pastoralist livelihoods, and regional collaboration. It criticizes any easy accounts that have suggested that cattle rustling is part of the primitive tradition, at the same time suggesting a more complicated account that reflects shifting realities of a socio-political and economic life along the Kenya-Uganda border.

## Findings

This rampant cattle raiding between Kenya and Uganda, especially between Karamojong and Pokots, is not a new phenomenon in the borderlands of the two countries. In the past, cattle were regarded as the foundation of wealth, social standing, and livelihood. Raiding went deep into the culture among the Karamojong and the Pokots as providers of rites of passage to young men, reinforcement of social connections, and access to valuable items such as cattle. These raids were traditionally small-scale in nature, involving spears, bows, and arrows, and to a certain extent, the customary law controlled them.

However, colonial rule introduced in the first half of the 20th century changed cattle raiding practices. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms also almost completely lost their significance due to the cumulative effect of colonial powers, which usually ignored the regional governance structures. Post-colonial conditions of state neglect, poor policing at the border, and the introduction of firearms provided a perfect background to the modern-day flourishing of cattle raiding activities, which the introduction of firearms has enhanced.

The Kenyan and Ugandan governments have noted the adverse effects of cattle raiding, so they have sent security personnel to the affected areas. However, governmental interventions have often been inadequate or counterproductive. Heavy-handed disarmament programs that treat the problem militarily have at times provoked tensions and caused additional violence.

An example is the Karamoja region in Uganda, where the government's move to disarm the Karamojong in the early 2000s was resisted. Most community members suspected the government's true motives, as the military's presence was instead seen as an imposition as opposed to a solution to the investigations of cattle raiding. Human rights abuses have been on the spot where security forces have been accused of destroying property and killing civilians in the course of disarmament operations. On the same note, in Kenya, the Pokot have grieved that security operations tend to favor only specific ethnic groups; hence, they feel marginalized and victimized. According to Kaufmann (2003), the lack of trust between the locals and the state has hampered the peacebuilding process, as the state is viewed as an intruder, not a protector.

Cattle raiding is a dominant issue in the area, and the high demand for limited resources such as water and pasture influences it. Hansen (2002) notes that environmental

factors, such as persistent droughts and frequent patterns of rainfall, which are hard to foretell, have enhanced food insecurity and resource shortages. With climate change affecting the pastoralist regions, access to grazing land has reduced, creating increased conflicts among the Karamojong, the Pokot, and other ethnic communities in the area.

Cattle raiding has become an essential survival tool due to the necessity of more cattle for economic security, particularly when cattle are scarce. In most instances, raiding is not a form of cultural expression but rather the survival of livestock numbers, which are a source of livelihood for the people. To the Karamojong and Pokot, cattle represent the source of wealth and food and are a tool for settling debts or bride money; hence, livestock rustling is not only a direct threat to the economy but also a means of survival.

Further, the illegal cattle trade has enhanced the entrenchment of raiding. Raided cattle are commonly sold in local markets with or without the use of corrupt government or intermediaries. This trade also encourages cattle rustling, where the stolen cattle could be regarded as an item of value. It has been established that ethnic identity contributes significantly to the perception and conduct of cattle raiding. In the case of the research participants, Karamojong and Pokot, raiding is considered a means of enforcing ethnic superiority and keeping the ethnic community in high esteem. The historical and cultural differences between the two ethnicities have eased how leaders mobilize for raiding.

Besides this, raiding has become an avenue of portraying courage and heroism among young men; hence, it appeals to young people in the two communities. This encouragement, together with a matter of honor, as viewed by the young men involved in the raiding, to obtain social status within their communities, causes the phenomenon (Schlee, 2012). This has institutionalized the practice as a way of identity in the society, with the status of the individual usually determined by the number of cattle he has or has obtained through raids.

The ethnicity of these conflicts and rivalry over limited land and water resources makes it hard to dissociate cattle raiding from the wider regional tension in the land. Thus, the Karamojong-Pokot conflict is not just purely economic but also affects land ownership, political authority, and ethnic pride.

### **Recommendations**

- i. A multifaceted approach is required to curb the effects of cattle raiding between the Karamojong and Pokot:

- ii. **Enhancing Local Governance and Conflict Management:** Locals, leaders, and elders should be empowered to resolve conflicts and control disputes. This must encompass the identification and institutionalization of the customary ways of resolving conflicts with conventional laws.
- iii. **Better Security Sector Reform:** Instead of focusing only on disarmament, security forces' training ought to emphasize community policing and conflict mediation. The military must not be viewed as a negative stakeholder in peacebuilding.
- iv. **Community-based Economic Development:** Diversifying the local economy is critical. Offering alternative livelihoods, such as sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism, or small-scale trade, would reduce the community's reliance on livestock for survival.
- v. **Regional Cooperation:** As there is a border issue to the conflict, Kenya and Uganda are to collaborate to establish regional security and peace activities. Cross-border dialogues and peace agreements could stabilize the region.
- vi. **Environmental Sustainability Programs:** Environmental elements, such as creating common water and pasture resources, would go a long way toward mitigating the probable scarcity of resources and reducing the likelihood of conflict over cattle.

### **Conclusion**

The cattle raid between the Karamojong and Pokot across the Kenya-Uganda border is a historical, cultural, economic, and political issue. Although it has been regarded as a form of artistic expression and a means of economic survival, in the present day, factors like the increased distribution of firearms, competition for resources, and the reactions of the states have caused the violence to rise and made the process even more devastating.

To address this problem, it is necessary to follow a multidimensional strategy in which local governance will be strengthened, regional cooperation needs improvement, and economic diversification and environmentally sustainable practices should be implemented. The issue is how they can balance their loyalty to their traditional practice and take care of the reality of the globalized world, where cattle raiding is no longer a mere cultural tradition. Still, it now poses as a source of violent fights with profound socio-economic consequences.

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