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Karamojong Women and the Extremes of Insecurity

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ABSTRACT

While the Karamojong pastoralists of north-east Uganda are experiencing severe insecurity following the loss of most of their cattle as a consequence of a misconceived and uneven disarmament process that started in 2006, Karamojong women are experiencing an even greater crisis than men. Not only external threats have increased, but also threats from within their communities. In particular patriarchal structures appear to have become more oppressive and less responsive to the needs of women. Representation of women on local councils and community education on women's rights by NGOs have raised hopes of at least being able to control the household goods they generate and of protection from more extreme domestic and intra-community violence. However, state justice services are negligibly functional, while community justice delivered by local council courts is subordinate to customary justice handed down by elders in the interests of men. This paper, based on fieldwork conducted by the authors in 2011, examines women's views and responses to this situation, asking whether momentum for change in gender relations and roles is being generated, or whether more oppressive patriarchy, and women's dissatisfaction and resistance to it, are a recurrent feature of the crises that have repeatedly afflicted Karamoja.

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper we look at Karamojong women's experiences of patriarchy at a time when Karamojong society seems to be in a state of crisis. This has followed an extended disarmament exercise by the Ugandan army, and extensive loss of livestock for a number of Karamoja's ethnic groups. This crisis has generated a predominating narrative of insecurity within communities, though this has been almost exclusively considered from the perspective of men. Stites and Akabwai wrote an important and insightful paper in 2010 entitled "We are Now Reduced to Women" on the impacts of the army's disarmament programme on men, but even the most depowered and emasculated of Karamojong men have very different lives to Karamojong women.¹ Most overtly, the women of Karamoja are commoditised: a man might refer to his wife as 'my father's cows', in reference to the brideprice paid; and their lack of property rights is explained in the phrase 'property cannot own property'. While both genders are experiencing extreme vulnerability to external security threats ranging from extrajudicial killings to starvation, women also experience threats from within their communities, and appear to have inherited men's share of responsibility for provision of family resources on top of their own, though this does not seem to have translated into an increase in control of those resources.

While most men have minimal access to security, in the form of protection or justice, from external threats, rural women appear to have virtually no access to security from any threats from any quarter. The research reported on here found that customary justice processes provide extremely limited rights and protection to women in theory, and often even less in practice. While in theory local government courts are empowered and enjoined to provide equal protection to women and men, in practice these are hybrid institutions subordinate to traditional processes and unsupported by the formal justice, law and order sector. The formal sector itself has, by the admission of its own actors, very small capacity in urban centres and negligible penetration beyond them.

In the past few years some elected local leaders, the UN and civil society organisations have worked to raise awareness, and often highly polarised and vitriolic debate, on the rights of women, both as an abstract concept and as defined by the Ugandan constitution and law, but also as manifested in practice by local councils with obligatory representation of women. This appears to have led to increased expectations of justice and protection by many women in spite of these being very rarely met. Apart from in the few urban centres the impact of women's rights awareness has not significantly reduced insecurity and injustice for women - rather it seems to have made them more conscious of how difficult their lives are - as one said, "at least now we know we are hurting". There are high rates of suicide, prostitution and out-migration to cities where many Karamojong women and their children survive by begging (Sundal 2010; Czuba 2012).

¹ While this 2010 paper makes little reference to those who were always women, Stites and Akabwai's 2009 paper discusses the impacts of disarmament on all sections of the community, paying particular attention to women.

There is little momentum to try to change this situation: the Karamojong elite has a range of motives to resist significant change or development in Karamoja, while the government tends to leave development to international partners and civil society agencies, and instead provides a version of security focused largely on forced disarmament and the repression of cattle raiding (Stites and Akabwai 2010).

This paper draws on data collected by a research team led by the authors in 2011 in urban, peri-urban and rural areas of Moroto and Kotido Districts. The research engaged community members mainly of the Mathenika, Tepeth and Jie ethnic groups.² We try to describe the situation of women in Karamoja as potential users of justice and security services, as well as what public authority service providers look like. The paper seeks to understand how a gendered investigation of security issues throws light on women's experiences of patriarchy in pastoralist communities; and how, or if, the deep stresses currently afflicting Karamojong communities, in a context of external efforts to promote greater gender equality, are catalysing substantial and lasting change in gender relations. A narrative of women's rights has been promoted by government and civil society, but has apparently not produced concrete benefits for women. The reports we were given by Karamojong women by and large suggest that they are profoundly dissatisfied with a number of fundamental aspects of the way they are treated by their families, their husbands and their customary leaders, and are hoping for the state – or any other willing and able institution – to address their situation. However Karamojong patriarchy is complex and resilient. Women's dissatisfactions may or may not represent a newly-found awareness increasing their capacity to demand change.

BACKGROUND

From towards the end of the colonial era in Uganda, the outside world has sought variously to reform, convert, settle, educate, modernise, develop and above all, disarm the Karamojong of north-east Uganda. At the same time, the peoples of Karamoja have experienced periodic droughts, famines and livestock plagues while continuously conducting low-intensity warfare amongst themselves and their neighbours. This combination of social and environmental shocks and cycles of state pressure, combined with humanitarian philanthropy must surely, it is often presumed, generate some cultural *change*. However the Karamojong are by most accounts a conservative as well as a resilient people, and repeatedly in the past, as the environment normalises with the ending of a disarmament exercise or a famine, a continuity

² Data was collected in two rounds in March and November 2011. In all, 18 in-depth individual interviews and nine focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 177 women; two FGDs were conducted with 18 men; six FGDs were conducted with justice providers including LCs and elders (89 men and eight women); and 31 key informant interviews were undertaken with representatives of civil society and United Nations agencies, local government, and the justice law and order sector (JLOS). The project, exploring sexual and gender-based violence and women's access to justice, was undertaken by War Child Canada. The views presented in this paper are however the authors' own. The writing of this article was supported by the Justice and Security Research Programme (JSRP), an international research consortium led by the London School of Economics (LSE) and funded by the UK Department for International Development (DfID).

of Karamojong social and religious practices emerges, along with the problems of containing some of these within a modern state.³

Raiding for cattle is part of these traditions, and has been carried out between the different Karamojong peoples and their neighbours in Kenya, Sudan and Uganda, in the distant past with spears and bows and arrows, but since the late 19th Century, also with firearms, and since 1979 with large numbers of automatic weapons (Mirzeler and Young 2000).⁴

With a population in 2014 of just under one million, Karamoja is Uganda's poorest region.⁵ Eight out of ten households fall in the lowest national wealth quintile;⁶ while 58 per cent of women and girls and 45 per cent of men and boys have had no schooling at all, against national averages of 20 per cent and 13 per cent respectively.⁷ The list could go on, with Karamoja the outlier on numerous measures.⁸

Some have argued that the acquisition of automatic weapons represented a turning point triggering fundamental cultural change in Karamojan society;⁹ and the destructive impacts of modern warfare and weaponry on pastoralist cultures have been discussed in other contexts. Hutchinson (2000) observed change in Nuer and Dinka perceptions of ethnicity in the course of militarisation during the second Sudanese civil war. This impacted in radically shifting men's perceptions of 'enemy' women - from transferable property to carriers of ethnic identity. The consequence was that while earlier, women and children might sometimes be abducted but were rarely killed in warfare and raiding between the tribes, by the 1990s it had become the norm for winning sides to kill women and children from enemy communities.¹⁰

In contrast, Knighton's (2006a) arguments about the Karamajong focus on how intrinsic warfare is to their way of life and how modern weaponry has been absorbed into the fabric of this culture. The gun began to replace the spear well over a century ago and has been the standard weapon of the warriors for many decades: while death rates may have increased, the impacts of modern weapons on cultural practices and relations are, he writes, small.

The first attempt to disarm the Karamojong was in 1945, and since then there have been eight such exercises (Bevan 2008 p. 54). The latest of these started in 2006 and was, according to

³ The peoples of Karamoja include the Mathenika, Bokora, and Pian (sometimes collectively referred to as the Karimojong) in the south of the region; the Jie and Dodoth in the north; the Pokot in the south-east and across the border in Kenya; the farming, Luo-speaking Labwor in the north-east; and the mountain-dwelling Tepeth and Ik, along with some other small groups. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is not widespread, but is practiced by the Pokot and Tepeth, and has been the subject of specific studies. We have not explored it here as we had little contact with or information from affected communities.

⁴ When Amin was toppled by the Tanzanian army in 1979, his troops fled the Moroto barracks and Mathenika warriors claimed the large numbers of abandoned weapons.

⁵ UBOS 2014. The 2014 census figure of 988,699 for the seven Karamoja districts of, Abim, Amudat, Kaabong, Kotido, Moroto, Nakipiripirit, and Napak, is well below that predicted through extrapolation from the previous, 2002, census. Sources including Knighton (2006b) suggest lower figures are likely to be more accurate.

⁶ UBOS 2011 p. 17.

⁷ UBOS 2011 pp. 23-24.

⁸ The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) produces a Demographic and Health Survey every few years, the most recent being 2011, the previous one 2006.

⁹ e.g. Mirzeler and Young (2000).

¹⁰ Hutchinson observes some hopeful signs that this pattern is being reversed through peace initiatives, including by women's groups.

the government, successfully concluded by 2010. The principle that this would be voluntary was rapidly lost. By 2007, widespread human rights violations, including summary executions, rape and torture by the army, occurring in the context of disarmament cordon and search exercises, were reported (Stites *et al* 2007).

There is a long history of ethnography of the Karamojong,¹¹ and a number of reports and studies of Karamoja in the 21st Century,¹² but there has been little discussion on the social position of women in Karamoja in the literature, though there is an increasing body of work on gender in other pastoralist communities.¹³

In Karamoja, men as well as women have been experiencing severe insecurity since 2006, early in the latest disarmament campaign. Of the young and old male members of rural communities we spoke to, all reported being tortured by the army during their searches for guns. All reported having lost their cattle, and having experienced massive change in their way of life including lack of adequate sustenance. Their problems were seen, by men, as externally caused – disarmament has not only directly brutalised them, but has deprived them of the means to defend themselves, their communities and their cattle: their guns. The social problems they were facing were described as following directly from this: lack of guns leads to lack of cattle leads to lack of food. This in turn leads to domestic violence and bad behaviour by both women and young men through the undermining of social structures, including traditional marriage, dependent on bride-price paid in large numbers of cattle. These findings were consistent with other post-disarmament studies.¹⁴

Men, however, though very vulnerable to external abuses, are able to access protection and justice within their communities through traditional and hybrid local government courts, both geared to protecting their property rights, not least those over and in relation to women.

The women we spoke to shared men's identification of uneven disarmament and their lack of guns as causal to certain security threats they faced, principally those external to their communities. Rape and exploitation by soldiers, who are still present in large numbers in the region, was said to be common. Murder and rape by other Karamojong groups – 'enemies' – had become common since many women were forced to rely on firewood collection as a means of survival for themselves and their families, taking them far into the bush.

However the social problems they faced they identified largely as structural – a near total lack of what might loosely be termed justice and security systems or services, willing or able to protect their economic interests, or even their lives, let alone their broader human and constitutional rights. Some impacts of disarmament are even seen by women as having had

¹¹ Starting with E.J. Wayland in 1932. Notable others include Neville and Rada Dyson-Hudson, Knighton, Ocan and Mirzeler.

¹² Stites, Akabwai, Gray and others associated with Tufts University's Feinstein Centre have contributed extensively to both academic literature and policy reports over the last decade.

¹³ See for example Talle (1988) and Kipuri (1989). A report by Kipuri & Ridgewell (2008), along with another by UNFPA (2009) are rare exceptions in addressing Karamojong women's social and security issues; Gray, Sundal, Dancause and others have written extensively on issues of Karamojong women's livelihoods, nutrition and health, e.g. Dancause *et al* (2010), Gray *et al* (2003).

¹⁴ E.g. Stites *et al* (2007); Stites and Akabwai (2009).

positive social impacts, with many respondents stating that to be ‘married *without* cows’ led to far greater freedom for the women concerned, as they were not *owned* by their husbands, and could be accepted back into their parents’ homes if they were unhappy in the marriage.¹⁵

This is highly significant. In matters generally regarded (including by the police and local councils) as familial, a traditionally married woman is the property of her husband and he has near total power over her while she has almost no recourse to protection. A woman in her twenties, who was not ‘married with cows’ said “*I think it’s good to marry without cows. You are tortured when you’re married with cows and they beat you because you are their property, but I have more freedom because I am not his property*”.¹⁶

A male elder stated that “[*m*]en beat women if they get drunk or misbehave or fail to get food for the children. About five women get beaten each week in this manyatta”.¹⁷ Of course, not all men are violent or abusive husbands, but according to the women we spoke to, it is common that they are.

Regarding protection from violent husbands there seems to be none:

“For such cases even if you reported to the [local councillor] he would say it’s a family issue and if you reported to the police they also say it’s a family affair ... There is no help - that’s why women decide to go to far places from their husbands or even commit suicide.”

Involving families likewise tends to fail:

“If he married you with cows and you went back home and explained to the people at home, then they will just say, ‘even if he kills you, there is nothing that we can do because there are no cows right now’. So they will just tell you to go back and bear it since there is nothing that they can do.”¹⁸

A young, unmarried woman is, by custom, the property of her parents, who are entitled to choose her husband and force her if she refuses. Often brides are very young relative to their husbands, who may already have other wives. Once married with cows she is subject not just to her husband but to his family. She may be lucky inasmuch as she may be allowed to choose her husband, and he may treat her well. Brideprice and other customary payments with their often concomitant proprietorial attitudes are well documented in other contexts.¹⁹ Less attention is typically paid to the role emotion may play in such exchanges, and our respondents suggested that this was indeed significant: while the principle of arranged marriage was universal, in practice young women were often able to manipulate the courtship process to end up with the suitor of their choice; and this included very old women,

¹⁵ A similar phenomenon was found among Acholi women where bride price had not been paid. See Porter (2015).

¹⁶ Interview, Nadunget, November 2011.

¹⁷ Elders FGD, Nadunget, November 2011. A *manyatta* is smaller than a village and typically comprises ten to twenty households.

¹⁸ Women’s FGD, Nadunget, November 2011.

¹⁹ E.g. Bledsoe (2005); Robertson and Berger (1986).

suggesting that this has long been the case. Porter has shown amongst the neighbouring Acholi people, how marriage rituals can be tightly linked with social belonging, identity and even social protection in ways that are often individually beneficial and motivated by 'economies of affection' (2013 pp. 226-231).

Within Karamajong courtship it is not unusual for young women to have multiple boyfriends (our respondents described juggling between four and 25 suitors at a time), and over time they study their characters. With careful management by the young woman, she may end up with the suitor of her choice. As one of them told us, "*the trick was to tell them equally I love them and be sweet to them until I had made up my mind.*"²⁰ A typical culmination of courtship, as it was described to us, is sometimes (but not always) a 'mock' rape: the boyfriend grabs the girl as she is on her way to the water point or to collect firewood and she is expected to try to run away and when caught to fight and pretend not to want her partner. They 'wrestle' until he 'overpowers' her. If a suitor suspects he is in danger of losing the girl to a rival he may attempt to get to her first. Another described how she guarded against being taken forcefully by one of her boyfriends before she was ready by staying close to her brothers or other women at all times. More than half the married women we interviewed had married men of their choice, albeit with parental approval. They described how they chose from among boyfriends that met with their parents' approval - a 'patriarchal bargain' - to ensure continued support if they encountered problems in their marriage in the future.²¹ However, others had been forced by their parents to marry or had been coerced into marriage following courtship rape (that was not feigned).

If her husband dies while she is young – as is quite likely in a region with a life expectancy of 47 years – a woman may be inherited in a levirate marriage by a relative to her late husband.²² In this she has no right of choice in custom (though sometimes in practice, and fear of AIDS has reduced the frequency of widow inheritance). If she is not inherited, her late husband's family has total control over what, if any, of his land or property she may keep to use, although it seems the norm that a widow is left with sole responsibility for all her own children and others, for example those of deceased co-wives, that have accumulated in her household.

Control of property is one of the issues around which the debate on women's autonomy or oppression under pastoral patriarchy has revolved. Hodgson (1999) sees this as much reduced amongst the Maasai from pre-colonial times through the impacts of colonial policy. Our findings suggested considerable variation between families. Some described a tradition that women have control of chickens and the crops they produce, and are able to sell these on their own initiative to pay for household needs, school fees etcetera. Others suggested that this tradition was being eroded, with men asserting control over all household goods. Many of the women we spoke to reported that they had no effective control, as in this example:

²⁰ Interview, Nadunget, March 2011.

²¹ Cf. Kandiyoti (1988).

²² UNOCHA estimated life expectancy in Karamoja as 47.7 years in 2007.

“In a case where a woman is married she can even own animals but a man has the authority to take and sell them, or even give them out or use them for marrying another wife, and a woman cannot say anything since she has no voice.”²³

However the picture is complex and in some ways challenges one’s expectations of oppressive patriarchy. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics’ Demographic and Health Survey 2011 (DHS) presents some curious findings (UBOS 2011). According to the survey Karamojong women have more control over their earnings than women anywhere else in Uganda (68 per cent versus an average of 52 per cent; p. 219). Their scores in different types of autonomous decision-making (around major household purchases, personal health care, and travel to relatives) come top or second for the different regions of the country. Karamojong husbands are experienced as being significantly less controlling than men from other regions (p.253). Women’s acceptance that their husbands are justified in beating them for a variety of reasons - from burning the food to neglecting their children to refusing to have sexual intercourse – is lower, sometimes much lower, than most other regions (p. 229).

Impressive though the scope of the DHS exercise is, some of these figures need to be treated with caution. Only two of the rural women we interviewed and very few of the rural men we spoke to were able to tell us their age, even approximately, or link their birth to national events, yet the DHS claims to provide precise figures for the average age at, for example, marriage or first pregnancy. Uganda has many different cultures – was a common understanding of something as complex as domestic sexual violence really achieved by the survey? Remarkably, given what we were told by our female informants, as well as what has been recorded elsewhere, Karamojong women’s experience of sexual violence according to DHS is 17 per cent, well below the national average of 28 per cent (p. 246) and their experience of spousal violence – physical, sexual or emotional, was lower than all other regions (45 per cent versus an average of 60 per cent, p. 259). Karamojong men, on the other hand were more subject to spousal violence than anywhere else in Uganda (56 per cent versus 43 per cent, p. 260). Here again this seems improbable – that more Karamojong husbands are beaten by their wives than *vice versa* – and is not what was described to us.

Nonetheless where it is testing attitudes it is apparently exposing something unexpected: a degree of autonomy in women. It is interesting to consider the DHS findings in relation to those writers who question the extent of male hegemony in pastoralist patriarchy. One of the points these make is that pastoralist women do not seem to be *subservient* in their attitudes and behaviour towards men.²⁴ This was also our perception. Notwithstanding conventions such as men sitting on stools while women sit on the ground, women make jokes at men’s expense, and are often loudly and publically critical of some male behaviours, both deviant and culturally orthodox. When permitted to be present, they speak openly at public meetings. And yet, perhaps counter-intuitively, this apparently assertive behaviour does not seem to translate into economic power or personal security. Might it be that Karamojong patriarchy

²³ Women’s FGD, Napumpum, November 2011.

²⁴ See Hodgson (1999), Holtzman (2002) and Krätli (2006). An exception is Kipuri & Ridgewell (2008), who note formalised subservience in Maasai women’s demeanour to men.

does not expect a subservient manner from women in their words and manner, but specifically in their control of resources? More than once, men described women being punished – beaten - by their husbands or elders for being ‘big-headed’; however this was defined as a woman having the temerity to sell things, including chickens and crops that have customarily been regarded as women’s property, without the permission of her husband.

We posit that Karamojong women are not so much intimidated by men as systemically overwhelmed. Perhaps demanding subservience is impractical given how separate are the normal lives of women and men. Not only are their social spheres distinct but when there are cattle, the semi-nomadic way of life means that they are physically separate for much of the year. Or perhaps the patriarchy does not demand subservience because its economic domination of women is total. This can be seen not only in domestic relations between men and women, but in the customary structures of control and justice that still predominate, discussed in the next section.

It is important to point out that human relations figure along with patriarchal ones, and are hugely variable. Some of our respondents reported being married, by their own choices, to good men who care for them and their children, and in which relationships they exercise considerable control of the families’ affairs. Others reported being household heads and exercising control over household members and resources. These stories, though, were not the majority.

THE STATE, THE ELDERS AND OTHER (IN)JUSTICE AND (IN)SECURITY PROVIDERS

The Justice Law and Order Sector

The state would seem to play a small part in social ordering and in justice and security matters in Karamoja. Notwithstanding increases in personnel, formal justice, law and order sector (JLOS) systems in Karamoja are largely inactive, suffering from enormous problems both of supply and demand. This was agreed in all the accounts we were given, including from those working in the sector, though a few were optimistic for the future: as the District Chairman of Kotido told us, “[l]egal services have just arrived in this community”.²⁵ There are, at least in theory, junior magistrates in each of the seven Karamoja districts, but these are unable to hear the most serious of cases, including murder, rape, and defilement. These must be tried by the Chief Magistrate, based in Moroto though he travels to the other districts. In 2011 there were no defence lawyers at all based in the region.

In terms of demand, courts were seen by most of our informants (including JLOS actors) as so slow as to effectively invite parties to take matters into their own hands. They are also seen as invariably corrupt. As well as this, the principles of formal justice do not resonate with Karamojong culture, whether in the types of offences, the nature of offenders (who in

²⁵ Interview, LCV Chairman, area Councillor, Youth Councillor, Deputy Speaker, Secretary, Kotido District, November 2011.

tradition are conceived as the families, clans, and/or age-sets of perpetrators), and resolution, which in Karamoja typically involves compensation (for men) as well as punishment of culprits.

From 1921, when they first appeared, up until 2009, there was a minimal police presence in Karamoja.²⁶ After 2009 numbers were increased substantially, such that a single policeman would be posted in a sub-county of 10-15,000 people. It is very rare for a case of whatever gravity to progress beyond the police. Non-police saw this as an issue of corruption, while the police themselves reported a lack of resources to investigate cases and transport witness, as well as lack of cooperation from the community.

Interestingly, there was a strong dissonance between theoretical and actual behaviour in relation to seeking help after crime.²⁷ Women would describe taking their hypothetical cases to the police, for example if her in-laws drove a widow off her land following the death of her husband. But when asked if this ever happened, no one could think of an instance, and there would be general agreement that it would be a waste of time to try.

To a degree the police are feared and may function as a deterrent: interestingly some respondents believed that the incidence of rape of Karamojong women by the army had declined since police numbers had been increased; and they would sometimes force errant husbands to contribute school fees; but they are not respected. It was generally felt that however serious the crime, even murder or rape of a child, the police would release the suspect if paid.

The basic cost of a police response is 10,000 shillings²⁸ as we were told in this women's discussion:

“The police are the worst in terms of taking bribes. When you get a problem and you report to them the first thing they will tell you is to bring 10,000 shillings for opening the case, then they will ask you the location of the culprit. If you tell them he is at the centre here they will demand for transport - that is worth 10,000 shillings. They will then get the culprit and lock him up, but before you leave the police station they will tell you, ‘remember to bring us airtime’ also worth 5,000 shillings, and you are given someone to go with you for money for airtime. In fact they are the worst here.”²⁹

Cases come to the police having been first reported to local councillors. Even where evidence and suspects are found, moving forward is often impossible. Complainants and witnesses, if they are willing to come forward at all, are threatened and sometimes killed by the family of the accused. If this hurdle is overcome, both parties are likely to object to the slowness of the procedure, lack confidence in the integrity of the process and actors, and have cultural and

²⁶ Throughout most of the colonial period there were only around 30 police assigned to the entire region.

²⁷ A similar dissonance was noted in Porter (2013), where women asked what they *would* do in relation to reporting a rape would describe engagement with the police and other services. When asked what they *actually did*, it was rare that they engaged with services at all.

²⁸ In November 2011 the exchange rate was about 2,550 Uganda shillings to one US dollar.

²⁹ Women's FGD, Panyangara, November 2011.

practical objections to publically giving evidence on matters that should be confidential to particular communities or families - in particular the size and location of a party's cattle herds, or their lack of guns, which would make them vulnerable to raiding. Most of the very small numbers of cases that come to court are related to cattle raiding, with other crimes being rarely prosecuted.

As in northern Uganda during the conflict there, armed volunteer local defence units were recruited with a civilian protection brief that the army was either too thin on the ground or too self-protective to undertake themselves.³⁰ These often didn't work out well, particularly given the relationship between young men and guns in Karamoja. There was one for a time in the Mathenika village we visited and the community looked back on them fondly, however they were now gone:

“[There was a local defence unit] here in our village but the army accused them of having run away with guns to the top of the mountain. They have been disarmed, dismissed and have been detained in the barracks. But they offered us protection when they existed, unlike now when the security situations have worsened from external attacks.”³¹

Contemporary politics in Karamoja tend to be internal to the ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Opposition parties have made few inroads since multiparty democracy was introduced in 2006. The former District Chairman of Kotido, Paul Lamanio, is serving a sentence of 42 years for the murder of his rival in the NRM primary elections in 2010. While justice, law and order services may carry little weight, the state - as represented by local leaders affiliated to the ruling party, security operatives and the army - is present and feared by the population at large.³² The idea of the state, through any of its organs, providing security or justice for individuals is far from most people's experience. In fact the state has been mainly represented by Uganda's various armies since the start of the colonial period, often brutally so, with the disarmament exercise initiated in 2006 perhaps the most destructive of all. As one elder reported:

“The army has really done bad things to our community. From the time we were disarmed, we have become vulnerable, our guns have been removed but other clans have continued raiding us. Killing and more so hunger has intruded on us since our cows have even been raided and even the army has made our wives and girls their own, and even take them away to the barracks, then later they are left in misery. If possible you can inform them to stop sexually abusing our women and girls. If possible these things should be told to the

³⁰ c.f. Finnström (2008, p. 91) on LDUs in Acholi.

³¹ Young men's FGD, Nadunget, March 2011.

³² Key informant interview, Kotido town, November 2011. This impression was shared by the research team, who encountered multiple references made by communities to the extra-legal dangers presented by the authorities.

President such that he may command the army to stop raping our women and girls.”³³

In a focus group of eight young men, ranging in age apparently from teenagers to late twenties, they agreed that “[t]here is nobody among us who has never been caned or beaten by the army”.³⁴ An aim of emasculation was crudely manifested during the height of the disarmament programme: we were told that twisting the testicles between two sticks, as well as castration, were common ways the army would extract information about the location of hidden firearms or punish the recalcitrant, sometimes causing death.³⁵

The government apparently sees the most recent disarmament as a success, and indeed people, notably aid workers and government officials, seem less likely to be shot by warriors (Stites and Akabwai 2009). If communities still possess guns, they are well hidden, and raiding, according to the government stopped in 2010 – though this was disputed by some of our respondents.

Community Justice and Security

Most justice and security in Karamoja, such as it is, is delivered at a very local level. In theory there are elected village (LCI), parish (LCII) and sub-county (LCIII) councils, all of which are, or were, authorised under Ugandan law to hold courts to adjudicate on minor crimes, set byelaws and hand out punishments in the form of fines and community service. Although active and present in most of Uganda at the time, in Karamoja in 2011 local councils were less consistently to be found. While LCs I and II have not been elected in any part of the country since 2002, and their mandates expired in 2006, this appeared at the time not to be a public issue elsewhere, and had certainly not hindered their functioning. In other parts of Uganda councils were kept up to strength, and council officers who quit or died were replaced.³⁶ In Karamoja by contrast some councils had become effectively defunct, and while there was usually an LC presence, this might be either LCI or LCII and their numbers and functionality might be substantially depleted.

LCs came into being during the ‘Bush War’ of 1982-1986 that brought President Museveni and the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) to power. Originally LCs were called RCs – Resistance Councils – and were used to manage territory captured by the NRA. In those areas of the country in sympathy with the NRM, RCs/LCs were rapidly accepted and became embedded when they were rolled out to all parts of the country. In areas hostile to Museveni’s government, the institution was seen as an imposed organ of the ruling party and took much longer to embed.³⁷ Nonetheless, they offer a potentially legitimate version of local

³³ Old men’s FGD, Nadunget, March 2011.

³⁴ Men’s FGD, Nadunget, March 2011.

³⁵ Also noted by Stites and Akabwai (2009 pp. 13, 32-34); and Saferworld (2010 pp. 41, 44).

³⁶ The rest of the country caught up with Karamoja in 2013, when LCIIIs’ remit to hold courts was suspended; LCIs however have carried on apparently unchanged. The authors observed this distinction in Acholi, Lango and Madi areas, and have found no evidence to suggest that this was an issue in most of Uganda in 2011.

³⁷ See also Branch (2010 pp. 25, 44); Finnström (2008 pp. 94-97); Porter (2013 p. 202).

democracy: LCs are drawn from the local community; they are elected by popular vote;³⁸ they are largely free to follow local custom in the justice they dispense; and yet are required to have women's and youth representatives, giving those groups a sense of having a voice. Why local councils should have been allowed to become so run down in Karamoja, and why issues of their legitimacy should have preceded such questions in the rest of the country is not clear. Possibly their democratic and (relatively) liberalising influence is seen as a threat by local political elites. Possibly they are so weak in relation to customary leaders that they are not thought to justify an effort to preserve. Perhaps LCs themselves are sometimes happy to relinquish what is clearly a difficult and dangerous role: as one said, "[y]ou find that the LCI suffers because the people accuse him of reporting them to the police, and the police also blame him for hiding members of his village who have guns".³⁹

In all settings we encountered where both existed, there was an overlap of personnel between LC councils and elders' courts. It is not surprising that those with customary and spiritual authority are often also those whom communities chose or feel obliged to vote for, and a coincidence of elected and customary roles is not uncommon in other parts of Uganda.⁴⁰ In Karamoja, the power balance between the two roles varied between urban and rural settings. A suburb of Moroto town was the only place we visited where there was no court of elders operating. There, though elders from both Mathenika and Tepeth communities formed part of the LC, they did not exercise power as independent entities. In more rural contexts it was clear that elders' courts not only function as independent institutions, but take precedence over LCs.⁴¹ Both fora take place in front of their communities. In Moroto town:

"The importance of the bell is that it alerts everyone in the community to a problem, so everyone, even young children, go to listen to the case being solved by the LC committee, and when the case is being solved everyone contributes, not only the LC."⁴²

Even if decisions are made in consultation with the community, the LC represents authority: "[i]f we discover a case that was not reported, the LC sends its youth to discipline such people".⁴³

A rural elder, also the LC Chairman, stated that "[a]n LC is like an elder and they promote peace and harmony in the area. In most cases when I am defeated I normally consult with the elders' court to intervene if the dispute is to be solved".⁴⁴ The distinction is sometimes expressed more symbolically:

³⁸ Or they were in 2002 and earlier. Subsequent elections for LCs I and II have been suspended, reportedly due to the costs involved in the context of multi-party democracy. There is speculation that local council elections may be held alongside the planned national elections in 2016.

³⁹ Elders' and LCs' FGD, Kotido town, November 2011.

⁴⁰ See Hopwood (2015 p. 9).

⁴¹ Singela, a Moroto suburb, has a mixed population of Mathenika and Tepeth with different traditions and customs. This is likely to explain the absence of elders' courts, although elders of both communities were members of the LC and respected community leaders.

⁴² LCI Committee FGD, Singela, November 2011.

⁴³ LCI Committee FGD, Singela, November 2011.

⁴⁴ Elders FGD, Nadunget, November 2011.

“What makes the elders different is, in a situation when an animal is killed, he eats a different part. Here he will not have the same share as the LCI. Like the thigh and all good parts of the animal belong to the elders and when it comes to us LCs we eat intestines, testicles of the animal and others, but not the really good parts. That is what makes us different.”⁴⁵

LCs generally stated that people bring all their cases in the first instance to them: they are more accessible than the elders, including cost-wise. Most LCs talked of a charge of 5,000 Uganda shillings as the standard, waived in cases of severe hardship. In some circumstances, however, the costs may be more: “20,000 shillings plus a bottle of beer if he doesn’t like you!”⁴⁶ They also claim that they refer all serious cases – where blood has been shed - to the police, and they have clearly been trained to see this as a strict rule. However a number of responses suggested that it is not always followed, particularly where, as in the case below, the elders decide to take charge. One LC told us:

“There was a time a lady was going to Moroto town and some men asked why she was following them and she said it was because she needed to use the same route, and they quarrelled and they beat and raped her. They were all from this community. They were fined. The elders’ court took charge of that matter so we were not involved. The woman called a community meeting and the elders fined the men. They beat them also and they had to kill a bull. She was given [medical] treatment from the contribution of the fined men. The elders didn’t give anything to the victim beyond that.”⁴⁷

Or in another case of defilement of an eight year old girl:

“After, when the child reported, they caught the man so they took him to the garden where he had done it. He had denied it but they saw the evidence of it in the garden. They know that he should be in prison for seven years but the elders’ court intervened and he had to buy a bull [for the elders] and pay for her treatment.”⁴⁸

Few descriptions of the elders’ courts presented them as likely to proactively intervene for the good of their communities. Generally they were described as being concerned with receiving payment. One LC said:

“Because of the issues of punishing the criminals by paying and bringing booze and animals for the elders, they’d rather come to us because the procedures are followed in a nice way. The elders want to benefit themselves, so people see when they bring cases to us they don’t have to do that.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Elders FGD, Nadunget, November 2011. cf. Lokuruka (2006) who describes the association of meat and status amongst the Turkana.

⁴⁶ Women’s FGD, Panyangara, November 2011.

⁴⁷ LCII Committee FGD, Nadunget, November 2011.

⁴⁸ LCII Committee FGD, Nadunget, November 2011.

⁴⁹ LCII Committee FGD, Nadunget, November 2011.

While (in addition to the elders' remuneration), traditional penalties for certain offences are governed by a principal of compensation, this does not apply to women (beyond medical treatment where relevant), though their fathers or husbands will be compensated in cases of rape or 'adultery'.⁵⁰ But however inadequate the behaviour of the elders reported above, it is at least a response, and hence contrasts with what people expect of the formal justice, law and order sector:

"Earlier this year a visitor came and ate and drank and when he went out he raped a girl of around 14 or 15 years old. The LCII [Chairman] got the man and took him to the police and the girl was on the way to give evidence, but by the time they reached the next day the police had already released the man. So the police are not very good."⁵¹

Traditional, customary justice amongst the Karamojong-speaking peoples is highly structured, with defined roles, procedures and penalties. The 'court', the *ekokwa*, consists of a meeting of the male elders of a suitable jurisdiction – perhaps a single *manyatta* for a local issue but potentially from a larger area depending on the magnitude of the case. Any member of the community may call on the elders to sit but will have to pay for this by providing local beer and in many cases slaughtering a bull for the members of the *ekokwa*. Evidence is examined and youth from the warrior cohort (and in the case of livestock theft, expert trackers) will undertake further investigations as instructed by the *ekokwa*. A suspect, an *ekasecan*, is confined to his community while evidence is being gathered, watched over by an assigned guard, a *njekeiwok*. A suspect who absconds is pursued by assigned spies and then arrested by his age cohorts (Muhereza *et al* 2008 p xvi).

Punishments are often specific and mainly feature fines of cattle or corporal punishment. The recognised penalty for adultery was regularly described to us as being 60 cows.⁵² A girl who defies her parents over the husband they have chosen for her, or a woman who quarrels with her co-wife, may be tied for hours or days to a termite mound to be tortured by biting ants, as in this case:

"I have my cousin sister in Napumpum who had a misunderstanding with her co-wife, and their husband went to the elders to solicit for help; and the elders handled the case, and my cousin became a culprit and was punished. She was made to remove all her clothes and they told her to sit on black ants – the anthill. The ants worked on her including her private parts and when she tried to get up they beat her telling her to leave the ants biting her private parts since those are the ones itching her and that's why she is disturbing the other wife. She suffered serious wounds on her private parts caused by the bites of ants and we are now just treating her at home here."⁵³

⁵⁰ 'Adultery' is understood to include both consensual and non-consensual sex between a traditionally married woman and a man other than her husband.

⁵¹ LCII Committee FGD, Nadunget, November 2011.

⁵² cf. Knighton (2007).

⁵³ Women's FGD, Panyangara, November 2011.

Beatings figure in many cases, from light and symbolic to potentially lethal. As one elder told us, if “*the complainant is not satisfied we cane the accused to please the complainant*”.⁵⁴ While we were not told of specific contemporary instances of capital punishment handed down by elders’ courts (though there were suggestions that this was not unknown), the recognised penalty for sexual abuse of a pre-pubescent child, understood as wizardry, is death by impalement. There is no appeal against a decision by the elders. Their justice, however inward the personal motives of the individuals concerned, is believed to be divinely inspired and they will curse anyone who defies it (Knighton 2005 p.132).

What emerged time and again was that elders do not offer adequate, or often any, protection to the women of their communities. The extremity of this is illustrated in the following account of an elderly woman, who is the ‘women’s leader’ in her *manyatta*.

“Sometimes we use the elders but most of the time you have to spend money to buy local brew to maintain them in their meeting, so if you don’t have money there is no reason to enter into debt to involve the elders in your problem. For one example, my neighbour used to send his kids to pick food from my home so I would always find something missing, and one day I discovered that it was his kids. And then I cried about it but I did not mention his name. But the next day he sent them again and I complained, so the next night he came with a knife and tried to kill me and he came to where I was sleeping but I screamed and people caught him. So the next day we had to have the elders sit. They cautioned him that it was not a good thing to steal food, and then try to kill someone like me even when it was my own food that his children were picking. After the meeting, five days later, he sent his children to steal food again so I called the elders again and told them that he had repeated it so then again he came and tried to stab me at night so I left that night and slept at my friend’s place. Then the next day I called my son who is in school in Moroto and when he came, the man told my son, ‘even if you can speak English you cannot do anything to me. Even if you go to the army or government or wherever, you can do nothing to me’. Then he told my son and me that he had killed so many people ‘so the two of you are nothing to me, you are just graves’. So then he said, ‘you tell your son he should board an aeroplane if he goes to Moroto, otherwise I will catch him on the way and kill him’. My son advised me to stay in company of many people because otherwise the man might kill me. Then I began only staying on my own during the day and at night I would sleep in friends’ houses. The same man beat some old man from a village and the old man went to report to the police, but the man had somehow gone to the police and convinced them that it was the old man who was wrong so they ended up arresting the old man that had been beaten, instead of helping him and arresting the real culprit. The arrest of the old man cost him two cows because he had to pay to be let free and then pay the man who beat him. Now that man is afraid

⁵⁴ Elders FGD, Nadunget, November 2011.

that the old man's sons will take revenge so he moved to Moroto and now my life is much safer."⁵⁵

From what we were told, this sad story is not at all exceptional.

It is not the case that elders *qua* elders are recognised by the state, nor is violence committed in the name of elders' courts quiet or secretive; yet we came across not a single instance where elders had been challenged or sanctioned by the state for overstepping their authority. It is apparent that the Ugandan state does not exercise a monopoly of violence in Karamoja (Weber 1965). Ben Jones, in neighbouring Teso, saw the state as wilfully absent throughout rural Uganda, while Susan Reynolds Whyte reached similar conclusions in Eastern Uganda (Jones 2009; Whyte 1997). Rebecca Tapscott (2015) instead sees the Ugandan state (as observed in Acholiland) as a looming presence in citizens' perceptions, often absent in practice, but aware of what is going on and able to intervene when its interests are threatened, and this resonates in Karamoja, perhaps even more strongly than in Acholi.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGE

In 1923 it became official policy that “[t]he Karamojong should be left in peace to tend their herds in the manner in which they had been accustomed in the past, and that every facility should be afforded them for this purpose”.⁵⁶ Many of those who consider themselves friends of the Karamojong have argued that this should have remained the policy of subsequent governments, and that more or less, and notwithstanding the inherent security, development and inclusion issues, such a policy remains the only humane and ethical option.⁵⁷ The research reported here suggest that very many Karamojong women aspire to major changes in a number of aspects of their way of life. It may be that Karamojong patriarchy is more benign in times of less stress and that generally at such times women have not been in active resistance to it, but we do not know as their situation was not investigated. The debate on development in Karamoja might have proceeded somewhat differently if women had been involved more in this discussion in the past. Looking at gendered aspects of justice and security has revealed a range of economic and social crises impacting on women, as well as the injustice and insecurity they continually face.

The women of Karamoja are now apparently often aware of their lives being unbearable – if not their own, then their mother's, daughters' or neighbours' lives. Elected local councils and civil society have exposed them to something slightly less rigorously oppressive and socially excluding than their traditions, and it is possible that they now have so little to lose that

⁵⁵ Interview, Nadunget, March 2011.

⁵⁶ Minute of a meeting of the Governor and other officials on 21st December 1923, recorded in Barber (1962 p. 119). Broadly speaking this remained the approach of the colonial government until the late 1950s, though there were various attempts, deplored by Mamdani (1982) and Knighton (2006b), to develop a market in cattle through reducing and improving the stock, especially during WWII.

⁵⁷ Knighton (see for example 2006b) is perhaps the most impassioned as well as androcentric of these.

change of a sort has begun. Expectations of what enactment of women's rights would entail were not high. As imagined by one young woman,

"I have a right because if I have sold something and I have used the money for providing food for the children and the man asks for it I will tell him that I have used for buying food, there he will not say anything. That means I too have that right of making that decision on my own because it's for the benefit of our children".⁵⁸

Another said "*I have that right to own property in my home because I am the sole caretaker of these items, as men only stay away from home most of the time. Sleeping under trees they only come late, so I have a right over what belongs to my home especially household items*".⁵⁹

Often it was said that women wanted to be able to choose to lend household items to friends and neighbours, without having to seek the permission of their husbands. Lending goods is an enormously important means of building social capital and cementing relations with family, friends and neighbours.⁶⁰ One can see why a patriarchal society seeks to retain male control of this function, inhibiting the ability of women to establish or strengthen their own networks. In an exogamous society women are already isolated in terms of kinship – the men in a *manyatta* will typically all be related, while wives will have been brought in from other clans and sub-clans. This structural isolation, combined with formalised frustration of their ability to build wider relationships, is deeply embedded. Yet we saw instances of women coming together in groups. Ideas of women's rights were being disseminated by a number of civil society agencies, and women's groups, more or less formalised, had been formed in most of the locations we visited. In Moroto town, one group we spoke to had just been trained as human rights 'caseworkers'. Their role was to provide paralegal advice and support to other women. In other places more established groups conducted community 'sensitisations', in particular, dramas they devised themselves on women's and children's rights, which they felt were effective at reducing male violence and child neglect.

However, reported instances of women acting collectively to protect each other were few. Here is one; however rare such instances, they seem to represent real change and are thus significant.

"Recently we women had to arrest the man who burnt down both the sorghum garden [of an old woman] and after eight days that same man came back and burnt the hut of that same woman. So we got him and took him to the police by ourselves as women because if we were to wait for the police nothing would be done without money being given to them because that woman is an old widow who is helpless."⁶¹

⁵⁸ Interview, Nadunget, March 2011.

⁵⁹ Interview, Nadunget, March 2011.

⁶⁰ Little seems to have been written about this, though it is noted in Maranz (2001).

⁶¹ FGD, Women's Group, Kotido, November 2011.

Krätli (2006) saw little violence by men towards women or children while observing a Turkana cattle camp in 2001. This may not diverge from our findings of very high levels of domestic violence: he was seeing a time of peace and plenty (by pastoralist standards). Almost all our respondents associated domestic violence with hunger and contrasted it with better times:

“In the past there were not many challenges. When there was peace and plenty of food there was no conflict in households. There was less beating of women because children had enough to eat.”⁶²

But the good times they talk of are perhaps not the norm. Gray *et al* (2003) wrote of their interviews with Karamojong women: “[t]he central motifs of these recollections and of the local calendar itself are famine, sickness, and death, linked by running themes of violence and flight” (p. S11).

It should not be surprising if Karamojong patriarchy becomes more aggressive in times of trouble, if husbands are more commonly abusive, and if women are more regularly deprived of control of resources when they are scarce. And if troubled times are the norm, then so perhaps are these features of the culture when stressed. There are political factors at play which mean that the Karamojong may never get back the majority of their cattle, while the settled, agricultural future that the government and some others are wishing, perhaps forcing on them, is regarded by others as a recipe for unrelieved poverty and food insecurity.⁶³ Permanent change to the Karamojong way of life therefore seems likely. However the direction this takes and the cultural impacts on gender roles and relations is unknowable, and there seems to be little will on the part of the state or the Karamojong elite to promote positive social change.

Are women’s dissatisfactions reaching a pitch at which they demand an improvement in their circumstances, or is this how it always is in times of crisis? Is knowing that they are hurting something new or something that recurs with each disaster? The signs of changes in behaviour in men and women that we were told about are on a small scale, and often to the detriment of women’s wellbeing. Awareness of their position will not necessarily lead to women being more able to take control, any more than their lack of subservience does. As long as they are systematically disempowered by custom and as long as the justice and security services claiming to support their rights are chimeral, then it seems unlikely that structural change will come soon.

⁶² Old men’s FGD, Nadunget, March 2011.

⁶³ As reported in the UN’s news agency, IRIN in 2014, “[a]lthough experts have been making this point for years, the government’s policies in Karamoja remain rooted, according to many who work on development there, in the misconception that cattle-raising is unsustainable and that growing crops there is a viable way to avert hunger and reduce poverty”. See also Krätli (2010) and the African Union’s 2010 Policy Framework for Pastoralism in Africa.

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