

Governing the Karimojong: Tradition, Modernity and Power in Contemporary Karamoja

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November 2011

Abstract: The complex gerontocratic governance system of the Karimojong, the largest ethnic group in Karamoja, was challenged in the second half of the twentieth century by the combined forces of the modernising Ugandan nation-state and undisciplined young men. The paper demonstrates that, although Karimojong power structures were substantially weakened during the period of great disequilibrium between the late 1970s and 2000s, recent years have seen their gradual reconstruction. Some traditional institutions have disappeared or declined, but the position of elders has been largely restored. *Ekokwa*, or an informal assembly, has partially integrated the state-imposed Local Council 1 structure and emerged as the new central political forum of the Karimojong. Karimojong culture remains in a state of flux and significant changes can be expected in the near future.

The research for this study would not have been possible without the help of Okia Emmanuel, Research Assistant at BRAC's Research and Evaluation Unit in Kampala, who served as an interpreter during fieldwork in Karamoja. The author would also like to express his gratitude to BRAC staff in Karamoja, in particular Abudi Charles (in Matany), Acero Annet (in Nakapiripirit), Adong Clara (in Namalu), Alanyo Pamela (in Moroto) and Ilekat Harriet (in Iriiri).

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Glossary

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>	<u>English</u>
<i>Ajore</i>		retaliatory raiding
<i>Akidung amuro</i>		ritual of cutting a bullock's hind legs
<i>Akilam</i>	<i>ηilam</i>	curse
<i>Akiriket</i>	<i>ηakiriketa</i>	sacrificial assembly
<i>Akiwor</i>		female initiation ceremony
<i>Akujû</i>		God
<i>Akoko</i>		theft, unauthorised raiding
<i>Akoro</i>		hunger, famine
<i>Ameto</i>		judicial process
<i>Amuro</i>	<i>ηamuroi</i>	thigh
<i>Anyamet</i>	<i>ηanyameta</i>	generation-set
<i>Areom</i>		restocking raiding
<i>Asapan</i>	<i>ηasapana</i>	initiation ceremony
<i>Asapanet</i>	<i>ηasapaneta</i>	age-set
<i>Ateker</i>	<i>ηatekerin</i>	clan
<i>Atukot</i>	<i>ηatukoto</i>	assembly, council, meeting
<i>Ebokorait/Abokorait</i>	<i>ηibokora/ηabokora</i>	a male/female member of the <i>ηibokora</i> (Bokora) section of the Karimojong which primarily inhabits Napak District
<i>Edosoit/Adosoit</i>	<i>ηidoso/ηadoso</i>	a male/female member of the Karamojong ethnic group (<i>ηidoso</i> or Dodoth) which primarily inhabits Kaabong District

<i>Edya</i>	<i>ɲidyain</i>	uninitiated man
<i>Egeteit</i>	<i>ɲigetɛi</i>	gazelle, the current junior <i>anyamet</i>
<i>Ejakait</i>	<i>ɲijaka</i>	sub-county chief
<i>Ejiot/Ajiot</i>	<i>ɲijie/ɲajie</i>	a male/female member of the Karamojong ethnic group (<i>ɲijie</i> or <i>Jie</i>) which primarily inhabits Kotido District
<i>Ekagatan</i>	<i>ɲikagatak</i>	prayer leader
<i>Ekapolon</i>	<i>ɲikapolok</i>	big man, leader, also: county chief
<i>Ekaracunait</i>	<i>ɲikaracuna</i>	uninitiated man, “he of the apron”
<i>Ekarimjongoit/</i> <i>Akarimjongoit</i>	<i>ɲikarimjong/</i> <i>ɲakarimjong</i>	a male/female member of the Karamojong ethnic group (<i>ɲakarimjong</i> or Karimjong) which primarily inhabits the Moroto, Nakapiripirit and Napak districts
<i>Ekasikout</i>	<i>ɲikasikou</i>	elder
<i>Ekatikiroit</i>	<i>ɲikatikiroe</i>	assistant chief (Luganda)
<i>Ekokwa</i>	<i>ɲikokwa</i>	meeting
<i>Ekungut</i>	<i>ɲikungui</i>	parish chief (Luganda)
<i>Emasenikoit/</i> <i>Amasenikoit</i>	<i>ɲimaseniko/</i> <i>ɲamaseniko</i>	a male/female member of the <i>ɲimaseniko</i> (Matheniko) section of the Karimjong which primarily inhabits Moroto District
<i>Emoit</i>	<i>ɲimoe</i>	enemy
<i>Emoruait</i>	<i>ɲimoru</i>	mountain, current senior <i>anyamet</i>
<i>Emuron</i>	<i>ɲimurok</i>	sanctifier, healer
<i>Emusugut</i>	<i>ɲimusugui</i>	European, white person (Kiswahili)
<i>Eɲatun</i>	<i>ɲiɲatunyo</i>	lion, an <i>anyamet</i>

<i>Epiannait/Apiannait</i>	<i>Njipian/Njapian</i>	a male/female member of the <i>Njipian</i> (Pian) section of the Karimojong which primarily inhabits Nakapiripirit District
<i>Etuko</i>	<i>ɲitukoi</i>	zebra, an <i>anyamet</i>
<i>Ekokolan</i>	<i>ɲikokolak</i>	thief
<i>Nawiamuros</i>		the setting of power transfer ceremony

Introduction

Following the collapse of Idi Amin's regime in 1979, Karamoja faced a series of crises which brought insecurity and hunger to its inhabitants and undermined their livelihoods. The armed conflict has been significantly reduced in recent years and most guns in circulation have been either confiscated by the government or hidden. The changed circumstances allow the assessment of the impact which decades of crisis have had on the Karimojong, the region's largest ethnic group, and their complex governance system. This paper provides an overview of recent developments in Karimojong culture and society and endeavours to evaluate the impact of the great Karamojan disequilibrium on the Karimojong power structure. In particular, it considers the role of the Ugandan state, which has since its inception been suspicious of Karimojong institutions, in the evolution of Karimojong governance system in the last half-century. The paper is an element of research efforts undertaken by BRAC to develop a greater understanding of Karamoja and its inhabitants in order to improve the quality of its programmes in the region.¹

Methods

The purpose of this paper is to uncover the extent of social and political transformation of the Karimojong society and discern its causes. For this reason, it adopts the process-tracing method which aims to "identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable" (George and Bennett, 2005). Process-tracing offers the opportunity to assess the causal power of particular factors and conditions under which political actors operate. Analytical explanation – a form of process-tracing – is employed to convert a simple historical narrative into analytical causal explanation (Ibid.).

Fieldwork was necessary to provide reliable information on the current situation in Karamoja, unveil particulars missed by other scholars and supplement existing literature which does not consider Karimojong governance in sufficient detail. It consisted of interviews conducted with seventy-nine local and national government officials, including Local Council 1 (LC1) members, and Karimojong elders (*ɲimoru* and *ɲigetɛi*) and elder women (*ɲamorɔ* and *ɲagetɛi*). Interviews with Karamojan members of parliament took place in Kampala; others were held in trading centres and villages of the Karimojong-

¹ Other papers in the series can be found at <http://oxford.academia.edu/karolczuba/papers/>.

dominated districts of Moroto, Nakapiripirit and Napak. The first thirty-eight interviews were conducted in March and April 2011 (late dry season); the remaining forty-one took place in October 2011 (shortly after the end of the abundant 2011 rains). To satisfy the requirements of Article 2 of the African Studies Association Guidelines, every attempt was made to ensure that the interviewees were fully informed of the nature of the research project.

The interviews' semi-structured character offered the opportunity to communicate freely about a broad range of issues. It was decided that semi-structured interviews were most suitable as they combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey (Schensul, 1999). Questions were selected prior to each interview on the basis of the particular informant's position and level of experience and expertise. The subject was always predetermined but, as Legard notes, "the interactive nature of the in-depth interview means that the researcher's next question should be determined by the interviewee's answer, not determined in advance" (Legard, 2003). For this reason, questions were frequently modified during the interview. This flexibility was instrumental in developing rapport with informants who were able to speak their mind and focus on their own area of expertise.

Successive Ugandan governments have been distrustful of Karimojong governance structures (as well as other aspects of Karimojong culture). Some interview questions dealt directly with some very controversial issues, including community-government relations, raiding and violent conflict. Given the considerable military presence in Karamoja, and the widespread and well-publicised allegations of torture and extrajudicial killing (which are supported by the informants' testimonies), it is possible that some interviewees were reluctant to disclose particularly sensitive information. It is widely recognised that in Karamoja, "all information is suspect and getting past the superficial narratives is a trying task" (Eaton, 2008a). Although the possibility of bias can never be entirely discounted, all responses were carefully checked using data triangulation.

Literature Review: Constructing Karamoja

Karamoja's huge dry plains and the mountain ranges and volcanic plugs which they surround are inhabited by a complex mosaic of ethnic groups. The vast majority of the region's inhabitants (as many as eighty-five percent) belong to the Eastern Nilotic Karamojong

Cluster (originally referred to by Gulliver as the Karamajong Cluster) (Gulliver, 1952; Knighton, 2010).² The Karimojong (*Nikarimojong*), the largest Karamojong group, live in southern Karamoja and are traditionally subdivided into the Bokora (*Nibokora*; mostly in what is now Napak District), Matheniko (*Nimasseniko*; in Moroto District) and Pian (*Nipian*; in Nakapiripirit District). The Karimojong lands are bordered to the north by Kotido District, inhabited by the Jie (*Nijie*). The final Ugandan group of the Cluster are the Dodoth (*Nidoso*) who live in Kaabong District in the north of Karamoja.³ These three ethnicities are commonly referred to as the Karamojong (the term is externally imposed, but has become accepted by the people to whom it refers). They share the same descent and speak related and mutually intelligible languages or dialects: Nkarimojong, Najie and Nadoso (together known as Nkaramojong). The Cluster also includes non-Ugandan groups: the Turkana (in Kenya), Dongiro (in Ethiopia and South Sudan), and the Jiye and Toposa (in South Sudan) (Dyson-Hudson, 1963; Gulliver, 1952 and 1953; Knighton, 1990 and 2005; Olowo Onyango, 2010).

The Karamojong share Karamoja with a number of other groups. The Southern Nilotic Pokot or Pökoot (formerly referred to as Suk) live in eastern Karamoja, primarily in Amudat District (as well as western Kenya). The Western Nilotic Ethur (who comprise JoAbwor and JoAkwa) occupy Abim District. Smaller relict communities of the Ik (known to the Karamojong as Teuso), Soo (Tepeth in Nkaramojong) and Nyangyia – who originally spoke languages belonging to the possibly Eastern Sudanic family of Kuliak or Rub languages – are also scattered throughout the region (Bollig, 2000; Ehret, 2001; Gulliver, 1952; Knighton, 2005; Peristiany, 1951a and 1951b). Prior to Eastern Nilotic expansion, Karamoja was inhabited by Oropom who might have been of Nilotic origin (Knighton, 1990 and 2005).

Eastern Nilotes arrived in Kidepo Valley in (what is now) northern Karamoja in the early sixteenth century and gradually moved south where current ethnic identities emerged by the mid-nineteenth century. The new ethnic groups comprised not only the original Eastern Nilotic migrants, but also existing inhabitants who were absorbed into the emerging Karamojong culture (Knighton, 1990). As they gradually expanded into the new territory, the

² The lack of reliable data makes any estimation of Karamoja's population uncertain. The 2002 Census claims that nearly one million people live in Karamoja (UBOS, 2002), but these figures are contested (Knighton, 2010; Stites et al, 2007a). The numbers provided by Mburu (2002) may be more reliable (Knighton, 2010). He puts the total population of Karamoja at 702,092, including 176,071 Dodoth, 95,185 Jie, 330,074 Karimojong (81,180 Bokora, 105,517 Matheniko and 143,377 Pian) (making the total of 601,330 Karamojong), 76,120 'Labwor' (by which he presumably means Ethur) and 24,642 Pokot. These figures do not include smaller communities.

³ The spelling 'Dodoth', 'Matheniko' and 'Tepeth' has become dominant in literature and this paper uses this form, although 'Dodoso' (or perhaps 'Doso'), 'Maseniko' and 'Tepes' are technically more correct, as 'th' is not present in Nkaramojong orthography.

Karamojong developed complex social structures and institutional complexes suited to their stateless way of life. The Karamojong society is organised through territorial groupings and kinship clusters of agnatic descent structured around cattle (which occupies a central position as a source of subsistence and manifestation of wealth which can be used in the transfer of bridewealth and sacrificial offering). Despite some claims to the contrary (Nalule, 2010), clans are recognised to serve primarily a ceremonial role, concerning stock brands worn by their members, children's hair markings, food prohibitions, domestic ritual observances and rites connected with fertility, marriage and welfare of children. Sub-clans tend to occupy a more important role in people's lives. Membership in a sub-clan has a bearing on issues such as marriage (the Karamojong are exogamous) and inheritance (Dyson-Hudson, 1963; Olowo Onyango, 2010).

As agropastoralists, the Karamojong occupy semi-permanent *ɲireria* or manyattas (singular: *ere*), around which agricultural production takes place, while cattle would be traditionally kept in mobile or semi-mobile *ɲawion* or kraals (singular: *awi*). The population of *ɲireria* is more permanent but movement of people and goods has always been an integral element of this system (Stites et al, 2007a). Kraals have elected leaders, but most governance functions in the Karamojong society are determined by a complex gerontocratic system in which political authority is vested. The arrangements which govern this system differ between different Karamojong groups. This paper is concerned with the Karimojong and the following paragraphs describe their institutions (although other Karamojong groups have similar practices).

The gerontocratic governance system is responsible for the creation of the basic units of social and political organisation: *ɲasapaneta* and *ɲanyameta*. An *asapanet* or age-set (plural: *ɲasapaneta*) consists of men initiated over a small number of years. Entrance to an *asapanet* is achieved through participation in a series of initiation ceremonies known as *asapan*. Membership in an *asapanet* places a man in an *anyamet* or generation-set (plural: *ɲanyameta*). There are two extant *ɲanyameta* at any one time: one is senior and closed to recruitment, the other junior and in the process of acquiring its members. A man cannot be initiated if his father is a member of the junior generation-set as he is expected to become a member of the *anyamet* which follows his father's. A generation-set forms a constitutive element of a cycle of four distinctly named *ɲanyameta* which succeed each other cyclically and continually. The current senior *anyamet*, the *ɲimoru* (mountains), succeeded the *ɲitukoi* (zebras). The *ɲimoru* beget the *ɲigetei* (gazelles), the current junior generation-set who will

be followed by the *ɲiɲatunyo* (lions) who will complete the cycle before a new one begins with a new set of the *ɲitukoi*. Every generation-set is considered as begetting the following generation-set, so that the relationship between adjacent generation-sets is akin to that between fathers and sons. Affinity between alternate generation-sets (grandfathers and grandsons) is also important for the Karimojong and expressed through ornaments: yellow (brass) ones for the *ɲitukoi* and *ɲigeteti* and red (copper) ones for the *ɲimoru* and *ɲiɲatunyo* (Dyson-Hudson, 1963; Gulliver, 1953; Olowo Onyango, 2010).

Generation-sets form the building blocks of the gerontocratic governance system of the Karimojong. Political, religious and social authority is the prerogative of the senior *anyamet* whose members constitute the class of *ɲikasikou*. The elders occupy a corporate office. Their position is not individual, but derives from their membership in the senior generation-set of which they are representatives. Their socio-political responsibilities are a function of the ritual role which they play as the connection between their communities and *Akujũ* (God), with whom they intercede for assistance and protection. Since society's spiritual well-being depends on the elders' links to the supernatural, their religious position provides them with the sanction to exercise authority in other contexts. The seniority of *ɲikasikou* is determined by the membership in *ɲasapaneta*, with members of the first (or the most senior surviving) *asapanet* in the senior *anyamet* endowed with greatest authority (Dyson-Hudson, 1963; Olowo Onyango, 2010).

The visual manifestation of the elders' religious and socio-political superiority is *akiriket* (plural: *ɲakiriketa*), the sacred assembly which functions both as a religious ceremony in which cattle is sacrificed to *Akujũ* and a political mechanism (Bollig, 2000; Knighton, 2003). *ɲakiriketa* are held in designated groves or under specific trees which are considered sacred. *ɲikasikou* sit in a semicircle, facing east, with the most senior *ekasikout*, *ekagatan* (prayer leader; plural: *ɲikagatak*), in the centre. Other *ɲikasikou* occupy the rest of the semicircle in descending order of seniority, with the least senior sitting at the two ends of the semicircle. The semicircle is surrounded by other members of the community, including women who are not allowed to participate in the *akiriket* but can be represented by *ɲikasikou* (Dyson-Hudson, 1963).

ɲikasikou, although their political position is distinctly superior to that of other community members, are not exclusively in control of the Karimojong political structure. In religious ceremonies they are assisted by the *ɲimurok* (sanctifiers, healers; singular: *emuron*) who supervise ritual procedures at *ɲakiriketa*, perform haruspication and act as traditional

medicine practitioners. Because of their haruspical skills, they are consulted before raids (Knighton, 2005).

Senior *ɲikasikou* delegate the responsibility for the implementation of their decisions to the junior *anyamet* and *ɲidyain* (uninitiated men, literally boys; singular: *edyā*; they are now commonly – and pejoratively – referred to as *ɲikaracuna*, ‘those of the apron’; singular: *ekaracunait*) (Knighton, 1990 and 2005; Olowo Onyango, 2010). These duties equip them with a degree of authority, especially if they are wealthy or the community elects them to the office of kraal leader (which would be, however, frequently occupied by an *emuron*) who – in addition to his policing role in the defence of the kraal – also serves as an advisor on matters concerning livestock management (Olowo Onyango, 2010). Although dissatisfaction with their inferior position is natural, the possibility of rebellion by the junior men is limited by the religious and economic control which *ɲikasikou* exercise over their communities. Disobedient men risk physical punishment distributed through the legal instrument of *ameto* or supernatural curse (*akilam*; plural: *akilamakinēt*) of an elder (Knighton, 1990). Most importantly, however, the junior *anyamet* is assured the inheritance of the authority currently exercised by their seniors. Its obedience, therefore, represents the realisation of mutual interest in the continuing existence of a stable system of social and political control (Dyson-Hudson, 1963).

As long as elders remain strong and healthy, this intergenerational alliance remains in force. As their numbers decrease, however, tensions build up. Many communities are left without a member of the senior *anyamet* and members of the senior *asapanet* of the junior *anyamet* gradually assume ritual and – by extension – political responsibilities. At that stage in the political process many members of the junior *anyamet* are advanced in age and exasperated by their inferior status, while their sons are not allowed to be initiated and incorporated in new *ɲasapaneta* because the old *anyamet* continues to exist. Complaints and acts of disobedience ultimately force the small number of remaining elders to relinquish power which is transferred to the junior *anyamet* in a formal ceremony of *akidung amuro* (named after its central element, the cutting of a bullock’s *amuro* or hind-legs) which unites all Karimojong sections at the sacred site of *nawiamuros* (‘the place of the sacred camp’) at Nakadanya, near Apule River in Moroto District. As the old *anyamet* retires, the successive generation assumes the senior status, allowing the launch of the first *asapanet* (*akurwor asapanet*) of the new junior *anyamet* and returning the political system to an equilibrium (Dyson-Hudson, 1963; Gulliver, 1953; Knighton, 1990; Olowo Onyango, 2010).

The age-set system has been in place since the nineteenth century. Shortly after its emergence, the territory that is now Karamoja attracted the attention of the expansionary Abyssinian state and Arab (Swahili) traders from the coast. These new actors gave the region its present name and introduced the gun, a new and effective weapon for warring Karamojan ethnic groups. While the age-system regulates and provides a stable institutional framework for political behaviour among the Karimojong, their relations with other Karamojan ethnic groups (including other Karimojong) have always been far more fluid. The dry habitat and lack of established land rights ensure competition for grazing lands and water sources. This competition would traditionally find expression in raiding (the Karimojong, being one group, would never raid other sections of their tribe). Cattle raiding is recognised as a socially acceptable (when blessed by elders) and honourable activity. It can be used to replenish one's herds or acquire cattle required for bridewealth (a form of raiding known as *areom*) or to retaliate previous raids or injustices perpetrated by a different ethnic group (*ajore*) (Mkutu, 2010; Olowo Onyango, 2010).

After 1911, the accumulation of guns and ivory in the hands of the restive local population alarmed the previously indifferent Uganda Protectorate authorities. Karamoja was declared a closed district (Karamoja District) and, in the decade leading to 1921, successfully pacified by the Uganda Police and, later, the King's African Rifles (Knighton, 1990; Olowo Onyango, 2010).

The British had no desire to invest heavily in the district which (apart from the ultimately short-lived ivory trade) offered few economic opportunities (Gray, 2000). In order to consolidate power without inordinate expense, they established the position of tribal chief to preside over the population of the newly created parishes, sub-counties and counties.⁴ These officials – frequently young and uninitiated – lacked the authority which their co-ethnics vested in *ɲikasikou* but, backed by the power of British guns, exercised arbitrary and often abusive rule which included forced labour and cattle confiscation. The British limited (but never eradicated) cattle raiding and gun ownership in the District but their other efforts – to promote missionary activity, school attendance and sedentary settlement – proved far less successful. Ultimately, as the Protectorate authorities were unwilling to devote significant resources to Karamoja, it was largely left to its own devices as a 'human zoo' (Cisternino, 1979) and no systematic attempt was made to substantially alter the customs

⁴ The Karimojong knew county chiefs as *ɲikapolak* ("big men"; singular: *ekapolon*) and sub-county chiefs as *ɲijaka* (singular: *ejakait*), while parish and assistant chiefs received Luganda names: *ɲikungui* (singular: *ekungut*) and *ɲikatikiroe* (singular: *ekatikiroit*) (Knighton, 1990).

and practices of Karamojan ethnic groups (Dyson-Hudson, 1966; Gray, 2000; Knighton, 1990; Mirzeler and Young, 2000; Olowo Onyango, 2010).

The limited developmental initiatives undertaken by the colonial authorities did not satisfy the new Ugandan government – headed by Milton Obote – which was formed at independence. Its efforts, however, which focused on livestock disease control, cattle commercialisation, food security, rural water supply and education and health facilities, proved unsuccessful. Instead, cattle rustling and interethnic conflict increased in Karamoja, facilitated by the flow of arms from neighbouring countries and production of *ηamatidai* (homemade guns) in Karamoja itself. The government's exasperation with Karamojans led to its increasingly authoritarian behaviour, including the enactment of the 1964 Administration of Justice (Karamoja) Act which suspended the principle of presumption of innocence in the region, effectively creating a separate legal system in Karamoja. The army was sent to fight the region's newly armed raiders. The brutality of Milton Obote's government was augmented by its successor regime (of Idi Amin) which is noted for the massacre of an unknown number of Bokora at Nawaikorot (Gray, 2000; Mirzeler and Young, 2000; Olowo Onyango, 2010).

Following the collapse of the Amin government in April 1979, Ugandan soldiers stationed at the barracks in Kotido and Moroto fled in fear of reprisals for their brutal treatment of the local population. The arms depot at Moroto was promptly looted by the Matheniko who acquired approximately 12,000 weapons. At the same time the Jie obtained the contents of the smaller armoury at Kotido. In the following year, Karamoja was hit by a serious drought, beginning a famine which killed as many as 50,000 people. The newly armed Jie and Matheniko raided their weaker neighbours, stripping them of their cattle. Other Karamojan groups rearmed during the course of the decade and the 1980s and 1990s saw continuous raiding by different Karamojan groups of their neighbours both within the region and in adjacent areas of Uganda (Acholi, Lango, Teso) (Gray, 2003; Knighton, 2006a; Mirzeler and Young, 2000; Olowo Onyango, 2010; Stites et al, 2007a).

Successive Ugandan governments of Milton Obote (II) and Yoweri Museveni attempted to contain insecurity in Karamoja through disarmament initiatives launched in 1984, 1987, 2001-2002 and an on-going exercise started in 2006 (Bevan, 2008). Military operations in Karamoja have been highhanded and there is clear evidence of human rights abuses. Multiple cases of arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and ill-treatment, extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, forced labour and rape have been documented (Bevan,

2008; CEWARN, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2007; Knighton, 2003; Mkutu, 2008; Powell, 2010; Saferworld, 2010). These developments have been accompanied by initiatives intended to promote economic and social 'development' of Karamoja (Bevan, 2008; FEWS NET, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2007; MFPED, 2004; OPM, 2008).

The concise account of the evolution of the political situation in Karamoja presented above reflects scholarly consensus. Similarly, although many sources are dated, there is little controversy about the character of the original Karimojong culture which was outlined in the first paragraphs of this section. Many developments of the post-independence decades are, however, heavily contested. There is no agreement about the causes of insecurity in Karamoja, its manifestations and the impact which it has had on social and political structures of the Karimojong (or other Karamojan groups).

Karamoja remained relatively peaceful and prosperous during the colonial period. Resultant increase in animal and human population put pressure on grazing, encouraging competition for land (Knighton, 1990). Insecurity and economic collapse are attributed to resource scarcity (FEWS NET, 2005) or changing (drier and hotter) climate (CEWARN, 2006; FEWS NET, 2007; Mabiru, 2010; Magunda, 2010; Nalule, 2010; Stites et al, 2007a). At the same time, natural shocks such as drought have always been present in Karamoja; others, therefore, attribute the developments of the postcolonial period to other factors (Bevan, 2008; Mamdani, 1982).

The idea that proliferation of guns has had a decisive impact on Karamoja has gained particular traction (Mirzeler and Young, 2000; Mkutu, 2008; Ocan, 1994; Oxfam, 2001). The presence of large numbers of guns in Karamoja is unquestionable, but precise figures have been vigorously contested (Eaton, 2008a; Knighton, 2006a; Mirzeler and Young, 2000; Mkutu, 2008). Those guns were used in cattle raiding which was on the increase following independence, and particularly after 1979. From this development, Charles Ocan (1994) inferred the emergence of 'commercial raiding' (as opposed to traditional raiding: *areom* or *ajore*) and the presence of 'warlords' (also: Mirzeler and Young, 2000; Stites et al, 2007a). The existence of 'warlords' has never been empirically verified (Knighton, 2003, 2006a and 2007), but there is evidence that at least some of the 'raiding' undertaken in recent decades is *akoko* (theft) and therefore beyond the control of *njikasikou* (Eaton, 2010; Mkutu, 2010).

The presence of widespread *akoko* and other forms of youth indiscipline – and elders' apparent inability to contain it – has been argued to indicate internal political breakdown (Gray, 2000; Mkutu, 2010; Stites et al, 2007a). The reality and extent of changes in

Karimojong institutional framework have been forcefully debated (Gray, 2000; Knighton, 2003, 2006a, 2007 and 2010; Mirzeler and Young, 2000; Mirzeler, 2007a and 2007b; Mkutu, 2010; Stites et al, 2007a).

The continuing existence of a single Karimojong identity has also been questioned. Tensions between the three Karimojong sections were already detectable in the late colonial period and the Pian did not participate in the last generation changeover which took place between 1956 and 1958, prompting Neville Dyson-Hudson to speculate that the section was in the process of assuming a separate, non-Karimojong identity (Dyson-Hudson, 1966). Much later, in the mid-1970s, Matheniko *ɲikasikou* entered into an alliance with Turkana which was effectively oriented against other Karimojong sections. This event marked the beginning of intersectional raiding which escalated after 1979, causing, Gray (2000) argues, “complete erosion of Karimojong tribal unity”.

Internal conflicts, raiding and – particularly – gun proliferation have sometimes overshadowed discussions about political developments in Karamoja. Ugandan state (in its colonial and postcolonial forms) has been present in Karamoja for a hundred years, yet its precise position vis-à-vis the stateless Karimojong (or other Karamojans) has never been clearly determined. The British attempt to integrate Karimojong structures into the indirect rule system (through the institution of tribal chief) was unpopular and ultimately inconsequential (Knighton, 1990). For some, the brutal, arbitrary rule of the postcolonial state effectively mutated it into yet another *emoit* (enemy; plural: *ɲimoe*) (Knighton, 2003), and imposition of military control over Karamoja has certainly been Ugandan governments’ key objective (MFPED, 2007; Mkutu, 2008; Olowo Onyango, 2010; Stites and Akabwai, 2010), but they have also expended significant resources in an attempt – recognised as highly ineffective (Bevan, 2008; Stites and Akabwai, 2010) – to promote ‘development’ in the region. Ultimately, it remains unclear what we should make of the political entity that is the Ugandan state in Karamoja.

The remainder of the paper endeavours to shed some light on questions raised in this section. Assessment of the significance of environmental shocks is beyond the scope of the paper and the focus here is on the Ugandan state’s contribution to the postcolonial disequilibrium in Karamoja. The paper considers the motivations of successive Ugandan governments and the consequences of their actions. It also attempts to clarify the controversy over manifestations of insecurity in Karamoja (*akoko*, ‘commercial raiding’ and ‘warlords’) and outlines the development of Karimojong political structures and identity in

recent past. Analysis of the current political status of the Karimojong allows reflection on the position which their institutions occupy in relation to the Ugandan state.

Otherising Karamoja

“In the days of the white man, we had a good life”, remembers Matheniko *egeteit* (singular for *nigetei*) Mariko Aporo. Similar expressions of nostalgia for the old times are not uncommon among Karimojong *nikasikou* (Interviews: Aporo, Lobuono, Loponek, Munyas, Dowan Lokolong). Such sentiments disregard the occasional heavy-handedness of colonial rule and the unpopularity of tribal chiefs, but the relative peace and prosperity of the Protectorate era may appear appealing after decades of post-independence chaos. Because of financial constraints and Karamoja’s relative insignificance, the British ‘civilising’ efforts were half-hearted; instead, the closed Karamoja District was turned into a ‘human zoo’ (Cisternino, 1979; Knighton, 1990). Although the authorities in Entebbe held its ‘primitive’ inhabitants in little regard, their *laissez-faire* approach allowed Karamojans a degree of social and political freedom.

This policy only began to gradually change towards the end of the colonial era with the introduction of modernist developmental agenda. At the same time, the heavily constrained interaction between the closed District and the rest of the Protectorate contributed to the establishment of crude stereotypes about Karamojans. When, in the course of preparations for independence, a Ugandan commission under the chairmanship of Basil Bataringaya was created to probe the problem of Karamoja’s ‘underdevelopment’, its findings – heavily influenced by the new modernist doctrine – reflected these stereotypes (Knighton, 1990; Mirzeler and Young, 2000).

Following independence, the Ugandan government was determined to resolve the ‘Karamoja problem’ which the commission had identified. The development discourse of the high modernist era (Scott, 1998) provided ready, easily replicable solutions, employed by colonial and postcolonial ‘modernising bureaucrats’ (Cooper, 1997) across Africa in an effort to set the supposedly ‘backward’ Africans on the path to the universal telos of modernity (Apthorpe, 1986; Cooper, 1997; Escobar, 1984; Ferguson, 1990 and 2004; Scott, 1998). In the modernist discourse, development becomes a temporalised historical sequence. Because modernisation and progress are the logical conclusion of the historical process, ‘undeveloped’ or ‘underdeveloped’ societies are expected to follow the path of their more

advanced peers (Ferguson, 2004). The reformation of natives' minds and the integration of local economies is the necessary first step of this process (Mudimbe, 1988).

Although earlier British colonialists and new 'modernising bureaucrats' offered essentially identical assessments of Karamojans and their cultures as inferior, their practical responses to the 'problem' of 'backwardness' were, therefore, fundamentally different. The modernist doctrine demands specific actions to ensure swift economic and social progress. The first Obote regime, provided with supposedly universally applicable panacea, quickly set about 'developing' Karamoja and its inhabitants. To its exasperation, Karamojans – expected to align their lifestyle to the 'norm' – did not comply. State-led development projects elicited little local cooperation and ultimately failed (Knighton, 1990; Mirzeler and Young, 2000; Olowo Onyango, 2010). Karamojans did not rebel against development; for the most part, they simply chose to ignore it. Modernity had little to offer for societies with viable, shock-resistant lifestyles and stable, effective governance systems (Interviews: Aporo, Lobuono, Loponek, Munyas, Otiang, Dowan Lokolong).

For modernists, resistance to inevitable social and economic progress highlighted Karamojans' backwardness and identified them as the Other. Their otherness served a dual purpose: as a measure of success for the rest of Uganda and rationale for intervention in Karamoja. "We shall not wait for Karamoja to develop", goes the still popular saying which surfaced in the early postcolonial era (Munaabi and Mutabaazi, 2006). It expresses the popular desire for modern development and, through comparison with 'backward' Karamoja, demonstrates the relative advancement and sophistication of other regions (Interview: Kiyonga). Simultaneously, because development is perceived as intrinsically beneficial, otherness of Karamoja functions as the justification for external intervention: Karamoja should be made to enjoy the fruits of development and prevented from undermining it (Interviews: Kisémbó, Lokodo).

The primary goal of such external intervention had to be to supplant the pre-modern (and therefore wrong; cf. Scott, 1998) Karamojan ways of life. The failure of initial development schemes in the region clearly demonstrated, however, the difficulty which the introduction of modernity there faced. Simultaneously, the Obote I regime failed to eliminate gun possession and raiding in the region: Karamojans proved to be not only unreasonable and wrong; they were also dangerous and the threat which they posed had to be contained. Military intervention in Karamoja was in many ways a very modernist approach: a technical effort intended to provide swift results and avoid the messiness of political solutions.

Developmental schemes which accompanied military activities followed the same pattern: because modernist plans were an expression of the modernist telos, local acceptance was not necessary. The most remarkable characteristic of modernism in Karamoja is, consequently, not its failure (Bevan, 2008; Eaton, 2010; Knighton, 2003; Stites and Akabwai, 2010), but its longevity.

Modernist thinking never entirely disappeared, but – widely acknowledged to be intellectually bankrupt (Apthorpe, 1986; Cooper, 1997; Escobar, 1984; Ferguson, 1990 and 2004; Scott, 1998) – it became associated with cultural insensitivity and failure (Ferguson, 1990; Jennings, 2002). In Karamoja, however, the type of top-down solutions it advocates has continued to be vigorously pursued. Official discourse paints a portrait of a region waiting to be developed, irrespective of its inhabitants' preferences (IOM, 2010b; MFPED, 2004 and 2007; OPM, 2007; Interviews: Achila Alepar, Kisembo, Lokodo).

The Ugandan state was not alone in its quest to develop Karamoja. Following the great *akoro* (hunger, famine) of 1980, it was joined by United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which stepped in to assist the victims. These actors have wholeheartedly embraced the depoliticising modernist discourse (Interview: Kiyonga). One International Organisation for Migration (IOM) report expresses disappointment that the nomadic pastoralists of Karamoja do “not respect administrative boundaries or national policy planning”, betraying the annoyance at the ‘savages’ for their disinterest in modernity (IOM, 200b). The same document identifies strategies for addressing Karamoja's development challenges. The solutions which it advocates are purely technical, limited to agriculture, land management, sanitation and – somewhat unexpectedly in a region without significant urban centres – urban planning. Its conclusion is worth quoting in full as it provides an unusually pronounced example of the common attitude to Karamoja:

In the future Karamoja will have an abundance of forests and wildlife. Each community will live in harmony with the environment. These communities will produce most of their own needs. Pollution and deforestation will be a thing of the past and peoples' health will be near perfect. All we need for this to become a reality is for everybody in Karamoja to begin putting the contents of this manual into action. (IOM, 2010b)

The dominant development discourse contained in such documents continues the long modernist tradition of overreliance on technical solutions and disregard for politics. Their activities emerge as a twenty-first century version of the World Bank policies in Lesotho's

Thaba-Tseka famously described by James Ferguson. “By uncompromisingly reducing poverty to a technical problem”, he notes, “and by promising technical solutions to the suffering of powerless and oppressed people, the hegemonic problematic of ‘development’ is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politici[s]ed in the world today.” Because of the World Bank’s (and other donors’) ignorance of the political background, dynamics and consequences of its programme, its Thaba-Tseka project failed to achieve its stated goal of eliminating poverty. Instead, this ‘anti-politics machine’ became an instrument which reinforced and expanded bureaucratic state power (Ferguson, 1990; see also Dicklitch and Lwanga, 2003). Development initiatives in Karamoja have proved equally unsuccessful in their efforts to transform the region and its inhabitants in line with the modern vision of progress. Decades of intervention and doctrinal disregard for Karamojans, their culture and real needs and preferences have, however, inevitably left their mark on the region.

Modernism has contributed to the creation of a specific discourse nearly universally used in relation to Karamoja, which presents its inhabitants, to quote a few accounts, as nothing but “a bunch of marauding warriors” or “vicious savages”, a “cattle rustling people” that inhabits a “wild” and “uncivilised” land and “evokes feelings of primitivity, savagery and nudity” (quoted in Mirzeler and Young, 2000; Oxfam, 2000; Powell, 2010).

Even more importantly, as an inspiration for military intervention and development policies in Karamoja, modernism is responsible for systematic efforts to undermine the culture and way of life of the Karimojong and other Karamojan ethnic groups. While the British attempted to integrate Karimojong structures within the system of indirect rule through the imposition of tribal chiefs, their postcolonial successors have preferred to disregard local institutions entirely in favour of usually unaccountable state officials. Although traditional agropastoralist and pastoralist lifestyles is recognised as the most viable livelihood option in African drylands (Ekaya, 2005; FEWS NET, 2005; Knighton, 2005; Levine, 2010a), both the government and non-state actors have actively promoted sedentary agriculture at the expense of pastoralism (FEWS NET, 2005; GOU, 2001; IOM, 2010b; Knighton, 2005; Oxfam, 2002). Continuous provision of food aid by the World Food Programme (WFP) and other organisations has created a dependency syndrome among a section of the population and discouraged food production (Levine, 2010b; Interview: Okomera).

Modernist doctrine and the racist attitudes which it has fuelled cannot fully account for the disequilibrium in Karamoja, but they help explain why the state – and its development

partners – never chose to effectively engage with the Karimojong and their institutions. In their eyes, by sticking to their traditions – from raiding to pastoralism to their gerontocratic governance system – the Karimojong proved themselves, and everything associated with their culture, to be ‘backward’ and in need of externally and – if necessary – forcefully imposed progress.

The Great Disequilibrium

The modernist vision of Karamoja never materialised. Top-down development schemes which ignored the wishes of the local population never stood a chance. The establishment of effective control over the land which the Ugandan government claimed to be under its jurisdiction also proved problematic. Colonial authorities had never eliminated gun ownership and cattle raiding, but a state of relative equilibrium had been achieved under their rule (Interview: Lomorin; Knighton, 1990). The Ugandan governments’ efforts were much less successful. The Karimojong were left undefended from cross-border attacks by the Turkana and (both Kenyan and Ugandan) Pokot (Interviews: Lobuono, Ngorok; Gray, 2000). The Matheniko – whose herds had been particularly affected by raiding – were effectively forced to enter into the alliance with the Turkana in 1974. *Nikasikou* still remember how “the Matheniko started to raid calves and goats from the Bokora [also Pian – KC]” and were “terrorising their cousins in quest for cows” (Interviews: Adome, Dowan Lokolong).

The inception of intra-Karimojong raiding precipitated the beginning of the great crisis in Karamoja, but it is widely recognised that “during Amin’s regime people suffered, but there was not too much conflict. But immediately after, people possessed guns. And then there was contest: who had most guns” (Interview: Dowan Lokolong). The events of April 1979 are commonly seen as the turning point in the recent history of Karamoja: “in truth, in 1979, when the government of Idi Amin was chased away [...] the Matheniko terrorised the whole place” (Interview: Lomorin; also Lobraw, Pedro). Again, the government was unable to provide security to groups affected by raiding, which had to acquire arms to avoid the fate of the Dodoth who were stripped of their cattle and left to die in the great *akoro* (Knighton, 2010).

The great Karamojan disequilibrium was a fundamentally modern crisis: it began with the state’s inability to defend its borders and population from cross-border intrusions, escalated

with the introduction of large numbers of modern weapons and was exacerbated by a famine which was likely affected (if not caused) by inadequate policies (Mamdani, 1982). At the same time, the image of Karamojans raiding each other while their families were dying from hunger appeared to some to vindicate popular stereotypes and the prescriptions of modernist discourse. It seemed natural that such barbarity could only be stopped by a forceful intervention to eliminate raiding and modern livelihood solutions to replace the pastoral lifestyle which had supposedly been proved unviable.

While the government and its development partners continued to operate on a basis of essentially constant ideas and prescriptions, the situation in Karamoja gradually changed. Many researchers working in the region – although frequently employed or funded by development organisations – recognised the importance of new developments and, consequently, the proliferation of weapons and increase in raiding received considerable scholarly attention. Attempts to quantify the number of guns in Karamoja proved futile (with estimates ranging from 30,000 to 200,000 weapons; Knighton, 2006a); more interesting discussions have focused on the character of raiding in the post-1979 era. A popular hypothesis holds that raiding – previously an internally driven phenomenon which acted as a redistributive and retaliatory mechanism – assumed commercial dimensions, encouraging *nikaracuna* to rebel against the authority of their elders; the *nikaracuna* supposedly formed raiding bands independent of the traditional structures of power and led by ‘warlords’. Those who subscribe to this hypothesis observed similarities between Karamoja and other war-affected areas in Africa, notably the weak West African states during the 1990s and quite indiscriminately adapted William Reno’s observations on warlordism in Liberia and Sierra Leone as an explanation of the violence in Karamoja (Gray, 2000; Mirzeler and Young, 2000; Mirzeler, 2007; Mkutu, 2008; Oxfam, 2001; cf. Reno, 1998). There are a number of problems with this approach. Firstly, the existence of ‘warlords’ has never been empirically verified. Secondly, there is some evidence of – likely limited – commercial raiding in the 2000s (Eaton, 2010; Mkutu, 2010); with increased government presence there has been more incentive to dispose of raided cattle secretly. The presence of commercial raiding in previous decades, however, has not been proved. Thirdly, no substantial evidence has been offered to suggest that any radical cultural, political or social arrangements have taken place among the Karimojong or other Karamojan groups. By overstating the degree of social transformation, such work disregards the strength of traditional structures and way of life and implicitly presupposes that modern problems of gun proliferation and commercial raiding can only be solved by the state.

Developments in Karimojong society and culture have, in fact, been far more subtle than such narratives suggest. The initial divisive trends among the Karimojong, initiated by the Matheniko-Turkana alliance in the 1970s, should not be seen as a radical break with the past. Karimojong identities are a relatively recent phenomenon and the formation of contemporary groups and sections was stimulated by a series of internal conflicts (Knighton, 1990). In this respect, the Matheniko estrangement emerges as a natural reaction to changing environmental and political conditions. The fluidity of Karimojong society is further demonstrated by challenges to elders' authority. Even in the 1970s, the Matheniko decision to raid other Karimojong was precipitated by *akoko*. In the following decade the phenomenon became more widespread and *ɲikasikou* found it increasingly difficult to check the behaviour of their *ɲikaracuna*. Undisciplined young men, perhaps influenced by modernist, anti-traditional discourse, became weary of elders' control and desirous of their prestige and wealth and, drunk with power offered by the gun, began to disregard authority (Interviews: Adome, Lobraw, Lobocono, Loponek, Otiang). There is no indication, however, that those *ɲikokolak* (thieves; singular: *ekokolan*) were united into organised units under the leadership of 'warlords' or comparable figures that functioned outside traditional structures. Although governance and judicial mechanisms – *akiriket* and *ameto* – continued to function, however, elders' control over young men certainly weakened: "a son could kill his father", recalls a Macheniko *emoruit* (Interview: Dowan Lokolong; also Aporo and Lokamar).

The weakening of social structures is indicative of the increasingly difficult situation in Karamoja. Matheniko raiding of the Bokora and Pian and the looting of Amin's barracks inaugurated a period of instability in interethnic relations in Karamoja. Successive droughts brought famine, forcing individual *ɲikaracuna* to become involved in *akoko*, while *ɲikasikou* formed alliances intended to strip their current – and frequently changing – *ɲimoe* of their cattle. Constant raiding and frequently very brutal government crackdowns on this activity made Karamoja one of the most dangerous places on earth (Interviews: Lomorin, Loponek, Loru). Between July 2003 and August 2008 there were 1,665 violent incidents, 2,841 human deaths and a net total of 189,821 livestock raided in the region. The small arms death rate stood at almost 60 per 100,000 (Bevan, 2008; CEWARN, 2009). In some years, insecurity became unbearable, with frequent deaths and constant feeling of insecurity: "when you would lie with your wife and you heard a gunshot, you would not father a son" (Interview: Loroto; also Dowan Lokolong and Lomorin).

Throughout this period the Ugandan state successfully alienated Karimojong (and other Karamojans) through the brutality of its military operations and the damage which they caused. Gross human rights abuses accompanied the next disarmament initiative launched in 2006. Frequent use of torture and arbitrary killings contributed, over the next five years, to the decline in violence perpetrated by Karamojans as many guns were confiscated and other hidden and left unused for fear of government reprisals (Interviews: Abra, Loroto). Many cows have been concentrated in army kraals to limit raiding (Interviews: Adome, Loponek, Loru, Otiang). Following nearly thirty years of increasing violence and deteriorating interethnic and intra-community relations, the disarmament drive has gradually gained a degree of communal support (Interviews: Abra, Apun, Lokamar, Lomorin, Lorec, Loroto, Loru, Pedro). Although they continue to see the state as an essentially foreign entity, Karimojong have welcomed the return of relative security. The great Karamojan disequilibrium took its toll on people's wellbeing and weakened traditional structures. The government – having established military control in the region – now wishes to extend the reach of its civilian institutions, including Local Councils, across Karamoja. The replacement of the traditional way of life by its modern vision of a uniform nation-state remains its ultimate goal (Interview: Lokodo).

The Ugandan state's military success in its struggle for the control of Karamoja has ensured that formal power structures (as opposed to informal, traditional institutions) occupy a privileged position. Their foundations, however, are weak. The brutality of the army, long the most visible state institution in the region, has naturally estranged Karamojans from the state (Interview: Loponek). Civilian institutions, of which Karamoja's inhabitants tend to be more appreciative (Interviews: Aleper, Lokamar, Loru, Moru, Pulkol, Teko), have remained weak. Their reach rarely extends beyond towns. The police force, which – although its corruption is noted – is seen as generally trustworthy, is not deployed in sufficient numbers or provided with adequate resources to ensure effective response to crime and regular engagement with communities (Interview: Dowan Lokolong). Official judicial system is seen as ineffective, inefficient and isolated from the population which it aims to serve (Interviews: Aken, Nangiro).

Although Karamoja has been given considerable attention at the national level (there is a dedicated Ministry for Karamoja Affairs which since 2009 has been headed by President Museveni's wife Janet), the government has remained unwilling to consult local population and has never seriously attempted to understand the causes and dynamics of the

developments in the region (Interviews: Lokodo, Okomera). This attitude is shared by development organisations with which the state cooperates and which have consequently become associated with government policies (Interview: Kiyonga; Eaton, 2008a and 2008b).

The first significant government effort to engage with Karamojan population has been through the imposition of the Local Council (LC) framework. The LC system, uniformly distributed across Uganda, is in many ways a textbook example of a standardising modernist policy. The following section discusses the current situation in Karamoja and how recent developments have affected Karimojong culture and society.

Reconstructing Karimojong Culture

“In the long run, when everyone gets educated, this business of cultures will disappear”, fears Matheniko *emoruit* Rafael Dowan Lokolong (Interview: Dowan Lokolong). In the last five years, the Karimojong have either been disarmed or forced to hide their guns. Authorised raiding – a central element of Karimojong culture – has largely disappeared. And yet other traditional practices appear to be undergoing a renewal. The cessation in authorised raiding appears to have been the result of a collective decision made by *ɲikasikou* following the experiences of insecurity in the preceding thirty years. “Whenever our children go raiding”, they have realised, “some do not come back. Why should we continue to bless it?” (Interview: Loru) It is also a reflection of a changed situation in which the government forces – which are known to torture and sometimes kill those suspected of gun possession or raiding – have established uncontested control over the region (Interview: Loroto): “we cannot bless the raids because we do not have the energy to run if we are discovered” (Interview: Munyas). The decision has not been unanimous: “people are now divided. The majority has gone against [raiding] but there are still those who believe in it” (Interview: Dowan Lokolong). Most *ɲikasikou*, however, “have put their hands behind” (Interview: Loru) and “are now fighting for peace” (Interview: Aleper).

“The minority still remains tasting the fruit of raiding” (Interview: Dowan Lokolong), but few *ɲikasikou* are willing to authorise their activity (there is, of course, no reason to believe that *areom* and *ajore* will not return in the future should the Ugandan government reduce military presence in the region) (Interviews: Adome, Aporo, Lobraw, Lokomar, Lokori, Lorotom, Loru, Ngoro, Oposha, Otiang, Teko). Although raiding continues, nearly all of it can be classified as *akoko*. Contemporary *ɲikokolak* frequently target their co-ethnics, not just

other groups, and have consequently estranged themselves from their communities, increasing the already significant likelihood of being reported to the police for gun possession (Interviews: Lomorin, Loponek, Ngoro). Many *ɲikokolak* have left settlements and hide in the bush or on mountain slopes (Interviews: Adome, Aporo, Lobraw, Lobuono, Lomorin, Loroto, Ngoro, Otiang). Those “*ɲulu eboyete alomoru*” (“the ones who stay in the mountains”; Interview: Munyas) or “*atekere lo kutui*” (“bush groups”; Interview: Otiang) “are not wanted in their communities” and will be punished by elders as soon as they can be apprehended (Interview: Lomorin).

ɲikasikou, whose judgements could be previously ignored by armed *ɲikaracuna*, have largely regained their authority (Interviews: Abra, Aporo, Apun, Lomorin, Moru, Ngoro, Otiang). The renewal of Karimojong culture does not, however, signify the restoration of the status quo ante. *Akiriket*, in addition to its religious function, traditionally played a central political role as a mechanism for arriving at consensus and expression of elders’ dominance. Its religious purpose, however, remains at the core and an *akiriket* cannot be held without sacrificial offering for *Akujũ*. The lack of cattle in recent times and young people’s unwillingness to provide bullocks for sacrifice have, consequently, undermined the institution. *ɲakiriketa* continue to be held, but the assembly is now much less frequent and the quality of offerings (and food provided to its participants) has radically decreased (Interviews: Lokomar, Loponek, Otiang). Big *ɲakiriketa*, like those held at Aceper Tolim, Angaro, Aterai, Koskei, Okodokoi or the great all-Karimojong *akiriket* at Abokot, still function and attract participants from across the region; smaller gatherings have been more affected. A village *akiriket*, held by local *ɲikasikou* and their friends to debate pivotal issues and pray for the wellbeing of their communities, may now take place only a few times a year (Interviews: Abura, Abra, Adome, Angiro, Aporo, Chegem, Dowan Lokolong, Locero, Loduk, Lokiru, Lokomar, Lorec, Loroto, Loseke, Moru, Munyas, Ocul, Opuri, Otiang, Pulkol). Sometimes a politician pays for an *akiriket* in an attempt to canvass votes, but the number of local people able and willing to donate bullocks and other resources for sacrifice has reduced dramatically. That development may be partly a sign of the declining influence of traditional Karamojong religion. Many (perhaps most) Karimojong, especially the young, have embraced Christian faith and do not seek cleansing at *akiriket* (Interviews: Lomorin, Sagal; cf. Knighton, 2005). Many *ɲimasikou* have also become Christians and the ritual is now seen by them as an expression of the new faith: “the way you pray is slightly different, but the rest is the same” (Interview: Lomorin). This syncretic form of worship ignores fundamental differences between traditional Karamojong religion and Christianity (cf.

Knighton, 2005) and it remains to be seen whether – assuming that Christian ascendancy is irreversible – *akiriket* can become a fully Christian ritual.

Nikasikou have successfully counterbalanced the (not necessarily permanent) decline in *akiriket*'s importance by an increased reliance on *ekokwa* (plural: *ɲikokwa*). *Ekokwa* is not mentioned in older ethnographic literature (for Knighton, 1990, it simply means an 'open space') and it is possible that this institution has only evolved in response to the constraints on *akiriket*. *Ekokwa* (sometimes *lokwo*; also referred to as *atukot*, a term known to Knighton, 1990) is a far less formal gathering than *akiriket* and lacks its religious role (this function of *ekokwa* is mentioned by Stites et al, 2007; Olowo Onyango, 2010; Stites and Akabwai, 2010). As many pressing issues cannot be discussed at the rare *ɲakiriketa*, *ekokwa* has emerged as the central Karimojong political forum. It can be attended by any community member (including women and uninitiated men); all those present have the right to voice their concerns and opinions before the final decision (which tends to reflect community consensus) is made by *ɲikasikou*. Although frequently held under a tree, the seating arrangement at *ekokwa* is not important (unlike at *akiriket*) (Adome, Apon, Aporo, Lobraw, Moru, Otiang, Pulkol).

Ameto, the traditional judicial process, has largely disappeared from most communities: it requires an *akiriket* and the government, which claims exclusive judicial authority, disapproves of it (Interviews: Apon, Dowan Lokolong, Lokomar, Moru, Ngoro, Ngorok, Otiang, Pedo). Outside of most isolated communities, it is today only practiced for most grievous offences: when an *ekaracunait* assaulted an elder in Aleklek, close to Iriiri in Napak District, he was severely beaten and forced to buy a bullock for sacrifice at *akiriket* (Interview: Ngoro). In most cases, however, *akiriket* is not possible and those who participate in *ameto* can face sanctions, including arrest by the police (Interviews: Loroto and Loru).

Ekokwa has filled the void left by *ameto* and assumed the position of chief decision-making judicial body. The exercise of traditional justice has, however, become dangerous; *ekokwa*'s greatest invention lies in overcoming this constraint through successful integration of the state-imposed Local Council 1 (LC1) structure into the Karimojong framework. Local Councils were introduced in Karamoja (and elsewhere) to extend the reach of the Ugandan state, but they have also offered the Karimojong an opportunity to establish a relationship with the government. The locally elected LC1 chairmen (there do not seem to be any women in this position among the Karimojong) are charged by the government with the responsibility for

identification and settlement of intra-communal conflict and reporting of criminal activity. In the Karimojong setting, their role is seen as complementary (and subservient) to that played by *ɲikasikou*: LC1 chairmen report to elders issues which demand their attention and, if necessary, an *ekokwa* is called. Many *ɲikokwa* focus on family disputes, but they can also discuss serious crimes. In such instances, once elders have reached their decision, it is the LC1 chairman's task to report the case to the police (Interviews: Apon, Aporo, Dowan Lokolong, Lokamar, Lokori, Loru, Moru, Ngoro, Ngorok, Otiang, Pedo, Pulkol). *Ekokwa* is most commonly an intra-communal affair, but neighbouring communities can be invited if necessary: when a thief from neighbouring Katanga was killed in Natumkasikou in Moroto District, for example, a joint *ekokwa* was held to determine punishment and compensation (Interview: Nangiro). This system is certainly imperfect and, once the case has been forwarded to the police, the local community – and its *ɲikasikou* – lose control over its progress. It demonstrates, however, the adaptability of the Karimojong in the face of very significant constraints.

Despite their ability to adjust to the changed circumstances through the creation of a modified governance framework, the position of current *ɲikasikou* remains vulnerable. The transfer of power to *ɲimoru* took place in the 1950s and most of them are very old. For some time now, elder *ɲigetey* have begun to assume positions of responsibility, especially in communities left without any *ɲimoru* (Interviews: Loponek, Moru). The *nawiamuros* ceremony requires significant resources currently unavailable following decades of frequent droughts (Karamoja, however, received considerable rainfall in 2010 and 2011). Thus far *ɲigetey*'s pressure on the senior *anyamet* to relinquish power appears to have been gentle (Interviews: Apon, Aporo, Dowan Lokolong, Loroto), but is likely to increase if the next few years bring sufficient rains. It is certainly difficult to imagine that the current situation will persist for an extended period of time (Interviews: Dowan Lokolong).

More pressure is also likely to come from the men who will – following power transfer – be initiated as *ɲijatunyo*. Many of them are advanced in age, but have never been initiated. *Asapan* is, for *ɲikasikou*, an effective way to establish control over younger men. Because the *ɲijatunyo anyamet* has not been opened, this measure has not been available in relation to a very significant proportion of the population. Another worrying development, from *ɲimoru*'s point of view, has been a trend among *ɲigetey* to delay their *asapan* for financial or religious reasons (as some Christians consider initiation to be a pagan and undesirable custom) (Interviews: Abra, Apon, Apun, Lorec, Sagal).

It remains to be seen how elders contain the threats which are likely to increase in the near future. It is clear, however, that they have successfully reversed the decline in their authority during the days of the great disequilibrium. They have certainly been more fortunate than *ɲimurok* who have suffered as a consequence of the introduction of allopathic medicine in Karamoja and because of their close association with raiding. Many Karimojong now prefer to visit government and religious or NGO-run clinics and hospitals in favour of the *ɲimurok* whose client base has consequently shrunk. *ɲimurok* were also consulted by raiders before attacks, resulting in government crackdowns. Many of them have been apparently killed and others have disappeared, to the extent that only small numbers of *ɲimurok* practising in isolated communities remain (Interviews: Apon, Aporo, Apun, Dowan Lokolong, Loponek, Loroto, Loru, Moru, Ngorok, Pedo, Sagal).

Another Karimojong institution which does not seem to have survived the great disequilibrium is *akiwor* (also *akiwora*), a female initiation ceremony (possibly also the name of the female age-group). Very little is known about it; *akiwor* is only briefly mentioned by Ken Gourlay (1979) and Sandra Gray (2000, who does not disclose its name) and most likely disappeared in the late colonial era or in the first years following Ugandan independence. Women of the same age-section (determined by their husband's *anyamet* and referred to, for example, as *ɲagetei* or *ɲamoru*) would adopt the name of an animal or plant in a formal ceremony (*akiwor*) and form a group which would gather to pray, celebrate and discuss important issues together (Interviews: Agan, Akol, Aporu, Kelai, Lopua, Loru, Natee). Such a group is claimed to have had certain judicial powers; apparently, it could punish its members or their wrongful husbands (Interviews: Agan, Lopua, Loru, Natee). The causes of *akiwor* groups' disappearance are not clear, but the fact that the male age-system has survived indicates its privileged position. Men's status in Karimojong society was certainly further enhanced by this development as women no longer had a mechanism for addressing their grievances other than such 'male' institutions as *akiriket* and, in more recent times, *ekokwa* and the LC1 structure, which have entrenched male dominance.

Even with a gradual advent of peace, therefore, Karimojong society has not fully restored its previous character. Although most changes have been more subtle than some scholars predicted, the survival of many Karimojong institutions in its current form remains uncertain. In fact, even the continuation of Karimojong ethnic identity is in doubt. "When I grew up, all [Karimojong] groups lived in peace", remembers Bokora *egeteit* Lomorin Peter. The Bokora, Matheniko and Pian formed one ethnic group and would raid their neighbours,

but raids against other Karimojong were prohibited and carried severe penalties (Interviews: Lomorin, Loru, Oposha). During the great disequilibrium, this unity disintegrated as the three sections began to raid each other. Sectional identities of the Bokora, Matheniko and Pian (but not other, smaller groupings which have sometimes been asserted to form separate sections; cf. Knighton, 2010) have certainly become more important, but the post-disarmament period has seen a slow return of common Karimojong identity (Interviews: Apun, Lobraw, Lorec, Ngorok, Sagal; cf. Gray, 2000). This trend seems to be weaker among the Bokora (Interviews: Adome, Lobocono, Munyas, Otiang, Pulkol). Common identity has likely suffered following the creation of separate districts for the three sections (Moroto, Nakapiripirit and Napak) and inter-sectional discrimination in district-level government institutions has been alleged (Interviews: Dowan Lokolong, Ngorok). Karimojong fragmentation could be potentially checked by a common, all-Karimojong power transfer at *nawiamuros*. The Karimojong suffered a lot during the great disequilibrium and their institutions have not emerged unscratched. Their culture has been subject to a series of subtle, but crucial changes; it remains to be seen whether this trend will be permanent.

Conclusion

As, following the success of the Ugandan government's efforts to establish military control in Karamoja, the region emerges from a long period of instability, the unique system of authority and control which has materialised there becomes more apparent. This system comprises two separate sets of structures, formal and non-formal (traditional). Apart from the army, the formal structure remains weak and isolated from the local population. Convinced of the inevitability of progress, Ugandan policymakers and their development partners have rarely engaged with the Karimojong and other Karamojan groups, alienating them through their top-down, arbitrary and frequently brutal actions. The traditional, indigenous governance structure remains much more relevant for the vast majority of the Karimojong, but it was compromised by the long period of conflict and insecurity. Recent years have seen a gradual renewal of the power of *njikasikou*, but they are likely to face increased challenges to their authority in the near future. The restoration of elders' authority against the backdrop of the relative decline of the central expression of their social superiority, the *akiriket*, has been remarkable and can be attributed to the emergence of *ekokwa* as the new key political forum. *Ekokwa* has begun to bridge the longstanding gap between the Karimojong and the institutions of the Ugandan state through the partial

integration of LC1 structure. The current situation is certainly not satisfactory and further evolution of this relationship should be expected.

Contemporary Karimojong society is in a state of flux. Although its institutions have not disintegrated (like some have claimed), the weakening of Karimojong identity, overdue power transfer, decline of traditional Karimojong religion and the disappearance of the female age-system (and resultant weakening of women's status) indicate that Karimojong culture will face significant challenges in the near future. *Nikasikou* have exhibited great resilience, however, and – if they resolve challenges to their authority – their efforts to reconstruct Karimojong traditions may yet prove successful.

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Interviews

Unless indicated otherwise, interviews were conducted in Njakarimojong.

Abra Thomas, Pian (Meriemong) *egeteit* from Arionoit, Nakapiripirit District, 13th October 2011.

Abura Paul, Bokora *ekasikout* from Aleklek, Napak District, 17th April 2011.

Achila Alepar Margaret MP, 17th March 2011 (interview conducted in English).

Acia Mary, Bokora *amoruaait* from Nadunget, Moroto District, 13th October 2011.

Acok Paul, Pian *edya*, Local Council 1 Chairman, Nakapiripirit Town Council, Nakapiripirit District, 13th April 2011.

Acuka Job, Pian *ekasikout* from Nakayot, Nakapiripirit District, 14th April 2011.

Adome Eustachio, Bokora *egeteit* from Okudmo, Moroto District, 7th October 2011.

Agan Lucy, Bokora *ageteit* from Kangole, Napak District, 13th October 2011.

Agan Marita, elder *Abokorait* from Matany, Napak District, 10th October 2011.

Aken Peter, Local Council 5 Chairman, Moroto District, 25th March 2011 (interview conducted in English).

Akol Helen, elder *Abokorait* and researcher from Matany, Napak District, 10th October 2011 (interview conducted in English).

Alepar Teresa, Pian (Meriemong) *ageteit* from Namalu, Nakapiripirit District, 13th October 2011.

Aleper Joshua, Local Council 1 Chairman, Iriiri, Napak District, 8th October 2011.

Amee Daniel, Matheniko *ekasikout* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.

Angela Christine, young *Amasenikoit* from Natumkasikou, Moroto District, 11th October 2011.

Angela Peter, Pian *ekasikout* from Nakayot, Nakapiripirit District, 14th April 2011.

Angiro George, Bokora *ekasikout* from Aleklek, Napak District, 17th April 2011.

Apon Mariko, Matheniko *egegeit* from Kakolea, Moroto District, 11th October 2011.

Aporo Mariko, Matheniko *egeteit* from Natumkasikou, Moroto District, 11th October 2011.

Apun Abed Nego, Pian *emoruaait* from Lakatapan, Nakapiripirit District, 13th October 2011.

Chegem Paul, Bokora *ekasikout* from Aleklek, Napak District, 17th April 2011.

Dowan Lokolong Rafael, Matheniko *emoruaait* from Rupa, Moroto District, 12th October 2011 (interview conducted in English).

Lokodo Simon MP, 16th March 2011 (interview conducted in English).

Kelai Maria, Matheniko *ageteit* from Natumkasikou, Moroto District, 11th October 2011.

Kisembo Moses, Chief Administrative Officer, Nakapiripirit District, 13th April 2011 (interview conducted in English).

Kiyonga Francis Adamson MP, 19th March 2011 (interview conducted in English).

Korobe James, Pian *egeteit* from Nangoromit, Nakapiripirit District, 13th April 2011.

Lamilo Mark, Pian *ekasikout* from Nakayot, Nakapiripirit District, 14th April 2011.

Lasee John, Matheniko *ekasikout* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.

Lobraw Abraham, Bokora (Tome) *emoruit* from Amaa, Napak District, 8th October 2011.

Lobuono James, Bokora *edya* from Kangole, Napak District, 8th October 2011.

Locero Mark, Bokora *egeteit* from Kokeris, Napak District, 18th April 2011.

Loduk Joseph, Bokora *egeteit* from Kokeris, Napak District, 18th April 2011.

Lodut Peter, Matheniko *ekasikout* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.

Lokamar Felix, Bokora *egeteit* from Kokipurat, Napak District, 8th October 2011.

Lokiru Mark, Bokora *egeteit* from Kokeris, Napak District, 18th April 2011.

Lokongo Regina, Local Council 1 Mobiliser, Kokeris, Napak District, 18th April 2011.

Lokori John Paul, young *Ebokorait* from the (future) *njitukoi* generation, Local Council 1 Vice-chairman, Matany, Napak District, 10th October 2011.

Lolem Maggie, Community Development Officer, Moroto District, 15th April 2011 (interview conducted in English).

Lometo Paul, Matheniko *ekasikout* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.

Lomorin Peter, Bokora *egeteit* and medical doctor in Iriiri, Napak District, 7th October 2011 (interview conducted in English).

Lopaka Mary, elder *Amasenikoit* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.

Lopejon Rapayat, Matheniko *ekasikout* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.

Lopido Martina, Matheniko *ageteit* from Kakolea, Moroto District, 11th October 2011.

Loponek James, Bokora *egeteit* from Matany, Napak District, 7th October 2011.

Lopua Maria, Matheniko *ageteit* from Kakolea, Moroto District, 11th October 2011.

Loputu Paul, Pian *ekasikout* from Nakayot, Nakapiripirit District, 14th April 2011.

Lorec Simon, Pian (Mogos) *egeteit* from Lowatachin, Nakapiripirit District, 13th October 2011.

Loroto John, Matheniko (Meriemong) *egeteit* from Kakamole, Moroto District and Local Council 1 Chairman in Namalu, Nakapiripirit District, 12th October 2011.

Loru Apatonu Samson, Bokora *egeteit* from Matany, Napak District, 10th October 2011.

Loseke Elijah, Bokora *ekasikout* from Aleklek, Napak District, 17th April 2011.

Loseke Paul, Bokora *ekasikout* from Aleklek, Napak District, 17th April 2011.

Lotee Cuka, Matheniko *ekasikout* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.

Lotee Thomas, Matheniko *ekasikout* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.

Lotil Luke, Pian *ekasikout* from Nakayot, Nakapiripirit District, 14th April 2011.

Moru Samuel, Matheniko *egeteit* from Lowoyaromai, Moroto District, 11th October 2011.

Munyas John, Bokora (Meriemong) *emoruait* from Kangole, Napak District, 7th October 2011.

Nangi Francis, young Matheniko from the *ɲitukoi* generation, Local Council 1 Secretary, Natumkasikou, Moroto District, 11th October 2011.

Nangi John, Local Council 1 Chairman, Nakapiripirit District, 13th April 2011 (interview conducted in English).

Nangi Mary, elder *Abokorait* from Matany, Napak District, 10th October 2011.

Natee Martina, Bokora (Woropom) *ageteit* (Loru Apatonu Samson's wife) from Matany, Napak District, 10th October 2011.

Nawothy Sabina, elder *Amasenikoit* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.

Ngoro Lodipa, Bokora *edya* from Aleklek, Napak District, 8th October 2011.

Ngorok Nadio, Pian *emoruait* from Lakiloro, Nakapiripirit District, 13th October 2011.

Ocul Otukoi, Bokora *egeteit* from Kokeris, Napak District, 18th April 2011.

Okello Peter, LC 1 Chairman, Aleklek, Napak District, 17th April 2011.

Omogin Paul, Matheniko *ekasikout* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.

Oposha Michael, Bokora *emoruait* from Matany, Napak District, 8th October 2011.

Opu Mary, Pian *amoruait* from Namalu, Nakapiripirit District, 13th October 2011.

Opuri Apanapok, Bokora *egeteit* from Kokeris, Napak District, 18th April 2011.

Otiang Zachariah, Bokora *egeteit* from Lokoreto, Napak District, 7th October 2011.

Patrick Okomera, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer, Moroto District, 24th March 2011.

Pedo Abraham, Pian *egeteit* from Namalu, Nakapiripirit District, 12th October 2011.

Pulkol Christopher, Bokora (Woropom) *edya*, National Resistance Movement Chairman and Local Council 1 Secretary, Matany, Napak District, 10th October 2011.

Sagal Daniel Lokumolemole, Pian *emoruait* from Namalu, Nakapiripirit District, 13th October 2011.

Sagal James, Pian *egeteit* from Lokona, Nakapiripirit District, 13th April 2011.

Teko Arcadian, Bokora *egeteit* from Iriiri, Napak District, 7th October 2011.

Tobiya Eceba, Pian *egeteit* from Lobulio Lomuu, Nakapiripirit District, 13th April 2011.

Zainabu Namboze, elder *Amasenikoit* from Katanga Village, Moroto District, 15th April 2011.