



## Genesis and Evolution of the Bandit Economy in Baringo Lowland, Kenya

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### Abstract

*Banditry among pastoral communities in Kenya has been in the upsurge since the colonial period. There has been a significant rise in reported cases of banditry attacks with devastating results among communities of Baringo Lowland of Baringo County in Kenya. Due to the loss of lives and disruption of economies of the pastoral communities in the area, the study examined the various historical socio-economic causes of the bandit economy in the zone. The study employed in-depth interviews with elders, youths and organized focus group discussions in Loruk, Mukutani and Kinyach areas of the lowland which is the theatre of constant attack and counter attacks by the Pokot, Tugen and Il Chamus communities. The oral evidence complements archival and documented evidence. The data was qualitatively analysed. The study adopted exploratory research design. Human Needs Theory was adopted for this study. The study reveals the socio-economic factors contributed to the bandit economy in the lowland from 1900. They include: increased population, demands for bride wealth payment, pressure to prove their masculinity after initiation, and infiltration of small arms. These were noted as the main factors that have continued to fuel banditry. The study, recommends a paradigm shift in social economic culturalisation and government, Non-Government and other development partners to focus on engaging the local communities and creating alternative sources of livelihoods that will combat the banditry menace.*

**Keywords:** Banditry, Transhumance, Dowry, Cattle rustling, Lowland.

### INTRODUCTION

Baringo Lowland is found in Baringo County in Kenya. The area has been inhabited by three communities namely: Tugen, Pokot and Il Chamus since 1900, Anderson (2006). These communities were primarily pastoralists in nature, Kandagor (2010). The Tugen came from the Hills of Kamasia and the Pokot from the Tiati Hills and settled in the Lowland with their livestock, Anderson (2006). They found the Lowland conducive for their settlement and herding of their livestock as compared to the hills which had become bare, Kipkulei (1972). Anderson further observes that, it is the youth that came to the lowland. They left behind the elderly and children in the hills (*Kurget*). Upon settling in the lowland, the Pokot and Tugen found the Il Chamus living around the shores of Lake Baringo. Il Chamus had already settled in the area, kept a small herd of livestock and primarily practiced small scale irrigation and fishing for subsistence, Kandagor (2010).

The Tugen youth were the livestock caretakers on behalf of their parents who apparently were aged and could not accompany them to the lowland, Kandagor (2010). The parents of these youth were of *Kipnyigeu* age set while the youth belonged to *Nyongi* age set, Anderson (2006). This is corroborated by Benjamin Chepserson (OI, 14.09.2023) who avers that:



Nyongi age set men who were the children of Kipnyigau were the first youth to settle in the valley/lowlands of Baringo. The area was so bushy and had tall grass which livestock were assured of constant pasture supply. This valley now marks the border of Pokot, Tugen and Il Chamus communities. They built scattered houses (Manyatta) and settled in with their wives.

These youths established their cattle, sheep and goat bomas in the lowland although they were scattered as they curved their designated pasture area. The lowland was initially used by Maasai pastoralists who were nomadic in nature and did not settle in one place, Kiptui (2021) observes. He furthermore avers that, the Maasai utilized the lowland as their reserve pastureland and mostly grazed their cattle in the highlands. This explains why the Tugen and Pokot youth found such a favourable area for livestock keeping unoccupied when they settled.

Upon settlement in the lowland, the Tugen and Pokot youth were inducted into some cultures by the few remaining Maasai and they also influenced them, Kandagor (2010). The Il Chamus who had earlier settled in the shores of Lake Baringo were slowly inculcated into small scale cattle keeping although their primary means of subsistence was fishing and small scale irrigation. The idea of taking milk mixed with blood according to Kipkorir (2009) was introduced to the Il Chamus by the Maasai herders. The Pokot and Tugen youth occupied the lowland in large numbers and most of the Maasai did not come back with their cattle and those few that remained were assimilated and absorbed into the Tugen and Pokot as well as Il Chamus communities as some informants elaborated.

According to Hennings (1956), the Tugen community was so secretive when it came to matters initiation. During initiation, the youthful men were circumcised, allowed to share a secluded place for about six months and their peers who had been initiated just before them tasked with the role of taking care of them, Chesikaw (2019). Once they were well healed, the elders of the community took over the advising role and elaborating on the community expectations of the youth. Kimaiyo (2016) points out that, the elders who had only proven themselves worth in the community by advancing successful raids in their youthful years were allowed to advise the upcoming warriors, while anyone who had tried and failed in a raid was chased away from the seclusion area and scorned upon by the other elders. Among the Pokot, *Sapana* initiation was undertaken and the youth with the blessings of known elders and medicine men were advised too in the process, Kiptui (2021).

The initiated warriors were then tasked with protecting the community against external attacks by their neighbours and wild animals, Osamba (2001). Initiation marked the point of entry into warrior-hood among the pastoralists as Osamba further observes. The youth were now depended upon by the entire community for protection. Thus, tactics of war were taught in the seclusion camps, Kimaiyo (2016).

Being pastoral in nature, the communities in the lowland of Baringo valued livestock so much. Kipkulei (1972) avers that, the Pokot, Il Chamus and Tugen communities loved their animals next to nothing. The Tugen had a term “*Teno Mureen Tukwaach*” which translates to “Men are valued and equated to the number of their cattle”. This means that, the more cattle a man had, the more he was valued and loved in the community. His opinion was worth the number of livestock he owned. The vice versa is also true. This phrase also elaborates more on why the communities had a special attachment to their livestock.



It's worth noting that these communities lived side by side in the lowland and shared the pasture and water which was abundant in the area where they lived peacefully for some years, Anderson (2006). The peaceful coexistence is elaborated in the intermarriages that occurred and the trading activities that have been documented to have existed across the borders of the communities, Chesikaw (2019). There were few cases of intercommunity conflicts that happened. Cattle raids were very few and far in between, Kiptui (2021). Those that took place were exclusively for replenishing stocks after devastating droughts like *Kipfel Kowo* that afflicted the Tugen in 1920s.

As the communities increased in population in the lowland, resources were diminishing and conflicts were on the upsurge, Kiptui (2021). Elders began using indigenous methods of conflict resolution to solve the issues that arose, Osamba (2001). These methods were so effective and the youth stuck to the directions of their elders. The elders were also objective and without bias as they solved issues. At the end, both parties were issued with justice and agreed upon to stick to the instructions. In the case of Pokot community, if one Pokot killed another Pokot in a raid, the elders issued *Laapai* which is a clan punishment. The whole clan was fined heavily for the mistake of its warriors, Kipkulei (1972). Such form of collective punishment ensured that each clan member was so observant never to bring such a punishment to its members and acts of carelessness were avoided.

Admittedly, in the past, raids happened and it was a taboo to kill women and children, Kandagor (2010) and Anderson (2006). They were considered harmless and helpless. But with time the raiders were emboldened and appeared to use scorched earth tactic which involves wiping out everything. What could be the causes and reasons for the upsurge in raids and the occurring deaths? In a nutshell, there have been several literature on the pastoral communities but there is need to sufficiently address the issue of the causes of the constant banditry attacks in depth and the economy that comes with it. These among other emerging issues are what this study aimed at investigating.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted exploratory research design which is qualitative in nature. This exploratory design is relevant to the study because it is able to investigate, establish and explain the causes of banditry in the past and elaborate on the bandit economy in the lowland of Baringo. The unit of study was the border area of Baringo North, South and Tiaty Sub Counties which the three communities of the lowland share and have been source of constant conflicts. The study used available relevant literature, in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions as data collection methods. The study was undertaken between July and September 2023 in the lowland of Baringo. To begin with, the researcher perused through relevant resources with information on the bandit economy at the Kenya National Archives and Documentation center in Nairobi, then held FGDs in Kolowa, Mukutani and Loruk areas in the Baringo lowland to cover a representative area of each of the sub-counties occupied by the three communities. Each FGD had nine to eleven participants purposively selected by the researcher. The members were above 18 years and both gender were considered so as to achieve a well-represented population. The age consideration was important so as to get a well-informed group of people who had either experienced banditry or had participated in the banditry in the past or have some experience on how the act of banditry is undertaken. This is in quest to get the real insider information on how the three communities were either affected by these bandits or had been affected by them in the past.



Moreover, in-depth interviews with the help of questionnaires and interview schedules with twenty purposively selected persons to crosscheck information obtained in FGDs were undertaken. The in-depth interviewees were: Chiefs (Six), Village Elders (Six), Members of County Assembly of Baringo (Two) and Reformed Youthful Warriors (Four). A research assistant with a historical bias was used to gather notes and recordings as the researcher moderated the sessions. In-depth interviews and FGDs were tape recorded with the verbal consent of the participants.

At the end, the data collected from both the primary and secondary sources were analysed qualitatively. Being a historical inquiry, most of the data collected was qualitative in nature hence the method used. All the recorded interviews were transcribed immediately after the interviews. Data was organized based on each question in the case of in-depth interviews. The analysis was conducted by organizing data in common sub-themes and sub-categories. This enabled the researcher to focus on one issue at a time and then proceed to the next sub-theme systematically. The data then became a source of interpretation of the historical socio-economic causes of the bandit economy in Baringo Lowland study area. After the data analysis, results and discussions were arranged in accordance with the research themes and then a conclusion and recommendations made based on the analysed data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Increased Population in the Lowland

During the pre-colonial period, the Baringo lowlands were less settled and used by the Maasai as their reserve pastureland, Anderson (2016). This means the Pokot community lived on the mountainous side of Tiati, the Tugen occupied the highlands of Tugen

Hills and the lowland was vacant most parts of the year except for the shores of Lake Baringo which the Il Chamus had settled in earlier. The Maasai pastoralists who practiced transhumance had alternatives and did not use the Baringo lowlands frequently. It only served as reserve pastureland in times of severe droughts and famine, Anderson (2016).

The assimilation of some few Maasai and driving away of most of them marked the full settlement of the lowland by the Tugen and Pokot youth as earlier indicated. This is further corroborated by archival information:

The Tugen tribe has inhabited the Tugen (Kamasia) Hills since before the British Rule. Here, they were probably much isolated but spread down and across the plains to the East in the wake of Pax Britannica. The Tugen have begun settling in the Lowland previously occupied by Maasai...(DO/ER/2/2/16/1)

This archival information is corroborated by Anderson (2016), Kipkulei (1972) and Kandagor (2010) who pointed out that the Tugen and Pokot settled in the lowland from the Hills from 1900 as they sought better lands for their livestock and increasing population of their people.

Akeno Julius (OI, 23.09.2023) observed that;

As the Tugen community settled in the Lowland and found the Il Chamus living around the shores of Lake Baringo, the Pokot sent their youth to look for pasture and settling area in the same locale.



He corroborates the information on youthful Pokot coming in to scout for their community. These communities utilized the lowland for grazing their livestock. The Pokot and Tugen youth increased their herd size in the lowland and the increased herd almost depleted the pasture earlier than was normal in the past. Admittedly, this population increase led to the loss of livestock during the drought period.

The rise in population in the lowland exerted pressure on the diminishing natural resources. No wonder that the Pokot, their leaders began agitating for expansion of boundaries to ensure the youth and their livestock herds had enough pasture. The lowland became small for the Pokot and Tugen herders to share. Thus, immediately after a drought, both the Pokot and the Tugen leaders in the lowland would marshal their youth to attack their neighbours so as to replenish their stocks. The increase in population led to diminishing animal feeds and water and this led to lose of their livestock. The loss of the precious commodity of the pastoralists pushed them to undertake raids in the name of replenishing and the youth viewed the raids as the only way of surviving after the ravishes of the droughts.

### **Traditions and Culture of the Communities in the Lowland**

The Tugen, Pokot and Il Chamus communities were traditionally pastoral in nature and supplemented this by small scale cultivation for the Tugen and fishing by the Il Chamus, Kandagor (2010). The main practise that sustained their livelihood was cattle, sheep and goat keeping. They prided themselves in having a large number of livestock and one was expected to own several heads of cattle as an individual in the community. An extract from archival material of 1935 attests to this in a peculiar manner.

The dung heap among the Tugen as status symbol was common. Stock numbers were and still are for most Tugen the only material expression of wealth. Thus from a wealthy man's stock would accumulate over the years in one place large dung heaps close to the home and the boma. Such may be seen as excellent example in the Mukutani area of Baringo South. Under semi-pastoral system or shifting cultivation, there was little incentive to use cow dung to replenish depleted soil fertility. But the dung heaps would remain as status symbols of large stock owners...DO/ER/2/2/16.

As per the archival information, the Tugen community prided in large livestock numbers and would accumulate the cow dung to prove so to anyone who wanted to dispute their wealth and status in the community. According to Baimet Salim (OI, 12.08.2023), families had large heaps of dung in their homes and when agricultural officers at some point were trying to convince them about the use of manure, they were so opposed to the idea as it would prove to other people that they were poor or also place a curse of poverty on them. To the locals, it was a taboo to disrupt a heap of livestock dung just to spread it in a plain.

Furthermore, Baimet affirms that in case the livestock numbers in a family diminished due to either diseases or wildlife attacks, the head of the family organized for some instant raids on the neighbouring community so as to replenish his stock numbers and maintain his status in the community. According to him, the larger the heap in a family, the better honoured the owner in the community and this was maintained by all means in the community. His claim is supported by archival source;



Those owners who were also counted as leading men in a kinship group were by custom (and still are) buried in the dung heap- and for several subsequent generations, people would remark “that was Arap So-and-so’s boma” as they passed by...DO/ER/2/2/16.

It is thus worth noting that the community valued livestock in large numbers and always ensured the numbers were kept high all through. It was a great honour as indicated in the archival documents to be buried besides your large heap of cow dung. One was remembered for generations as the cow dung accumulated by the subsequent owners of the boma. Baimet notes that indeed, the custom might be broken down due to spread of individual holdings on better land use and the spread of Christianity among the pastoralists. The strong attachment to keeping large livestock as well as accumulating the heaps of dung might diminish but raids for better stocks advanced due to the demand.

### **Encouragement of the Youth to Raid**

The strength of a community was measured by the ability of its youth to carry out a successful raid against their neighbours. Kimaiyo (2016) indicates that, the community appreciated an aggressive youth generation as they knew they were well protected against external attacks and in case of a famine they would get sufficient food. This is corroborated by Kipng’ok (2016). He avers that, successful raids were praised by the community and songs were composed to prove that;

Oh Chesaina titil X2, oh mabisei taon X2, Chesaina, Oh!! Chesaina nekinam sigirio chaat kupchalaka X2.

(Oh Chesaina Press it hard X2, Oh He does not miss to be in town X2

Oh!! Chesaina who singlehandedly caught a donkey by the hind legs and split it.)

This was a song sung in the Tugen community praising a youth named Chesaina for single handedly killing a donkey during a raid. He is praised for walking around town with pride after having a successful raid. The song has a large prominence among the Tugen and Pokot of the Lowland to prove that indeed the youth killed the donkey using his bare hand and was the pride of the warriors. Every initiated youth needed to be like Chesaina a hero of the community.

Among the Tugen and Pokot communities that occupy the Lowland, successful raiders were considered heroic and accorded social status higher than those that have never gone for any raids, Kiptui (2021). Those who had never participated in cattle raids were considered cowards and ridiculed and at some point even shamed for failure to bring home anything tangible. It was a cultural thing to participate in cattle raids and the community encouraged it. Youth according to Gideon Lenyanet (OI, 23.08.2023) prided in successful raids after plundering large herds and more importantly if they returned with military regalia or a head of killed opponent. They usually came back to song and dance. The praises were sung by their mothers and even at times prospective brides. This heroism was in contrast to the villain status for those who have never attended raids or returned without having any loot.

Normally after circumcision and seclusion the initiated would participate in raiding to prove their worth and they returned to a grand reception by their families. The Mothers of initiates in Pokot and Tugen communities were not allowed to attend the circumcision of their young





initiates but would be the first ones to receive them after the initiation process, Julius Akeno (OI, 23.09.2023). Admittedly, they are the ones that encouraged the youth to partake in raids immediately after initiation for them to acquire cattle for bride price. Indeed, the mothers played a great role in encouraging their sons to go into raids against their neighbours. Chesikaw (2019) asserts that immediately the warriors were successful in a raid and returned home with herds of cattle, ululations and heroic welcome met them. Their mothers led the praise songs and among the welcoming parties would be their potential brides singing songs of praise to the youth as earlier indicated.

This social urge to earn respect among peers and admiration of their mothers and potential brides made the young warriors to yearn for the time they would perform a successful cattle raid. It was always normal to hear women while milking their cows chanting or humming songs that praise their sons for bravery and enabling them acquire cattle for milking. Furthermore, while taking care of babies the mothers hummed lullabies composed to sooth their sons to go to successful raids to enhance their status in the families.

### **Dowry Payment and Marriage Ceremonies**

The initiated youth who were aged between 15 years to 20 and considered the backbone of the communities of herders and responsible for security were the ones that needed to marry and establish families. According to Achuka and Gisesa (2019), one of the main reasons for constant cattle raids and rustling between communities neighbouring each other was the need to acquire livestock to use as bride price. The urge was so huge and it became the driving force behind the youth staging raids in order for them to marshal the much required number of herds to pay bride price.

Kiptui (2021) and Chesikaw (2019) assert that young men especially from poor families had to raise bride wealth by themselves. Most times through armed cattle raids. In the contemporary times, the Pokot have a tendency of demanding as many as 40 heads of cows and 60 goats as bride price. This demand is exorbitant for the youth and this forces some to undertake raiding in order to pay the dowry. An average family will have their cattle in that range and if they had more than one son they would not allow one to take all the livestock. Thus, every young man was expected to have accumulated his stock before entering into marriage arrangements. Thus in most cases, the young man immediately after initiation would raid their neighbours so as to get the cattle and pay easily the bride price. This explains why after initiation in Pokot and Tugen areas there were increased cases of cattle raids and rustling. After initiation the warriors were obligated to marry and continue their lineage.

Among the Pokot community as elaborated by the FGD elaboration in Loruk, the young woman to be married in the community is the cause of the raids which lead to insecurity in the area. The bride tends to motivate the youth to partake in the raids so as to acquire the substantial number of cattle to pay the bride price to her parents before marriage. It is the young women who give the young man pressure so as to look for the required number of cattle. In some instances, the family of the bride might be having a son who is also almost getting married so they pressure the young woman to be married so that they can get her bride wealth then the brother uses the same to acquire a wife. This at times happens although in some rare instances and this pressure makes the woman to force her husband to make quick arrangements to acquire the cattle. In most cases, Kiptui (2021) notes, the man wants to marry and needs the livestock to marry. So he has to go for cattle raids among his neighbours the



Tugen and Il Chamus to raise the number. If a woman is not married by exchanging cows, the marriage remained invalid. Any man with cattle could “collect” her from the man with whom they are living together and the husband will have no grounds to seek justice for infidelity since they did not legitimize it paying the bride price.

A woman who had eloped with her husband without paying any bride price was considered the child of her parents and not married at all to the man. Among the Pokot and Tugen communities, however the number of children one had sired with the lady remained a child of her parents and could be summoned home any time, Chesikaw (2019). The family of the woman y and that of the man were considered strangers up and until the time when bride price was paid. The Tugen even scorned on such arrangements so much. If the woman died before her bride price was paid, the husband was not allowed to bury her until when her bride price was paid first. The husband and his clan paid the required bride price then settle the burial after that. This points out at how the dowry was considered a sacred thing and many local people strived to pay the dowry early enough to avoid embarrassment.

It is thus noted that, these events point out to how important bride price and wealth accumulation was considered among the communities of the lowland. The youth from poor backgrounds had no alternative other than organizing raids with the blessings of their elders for them to acquire sufficient livestock to be able to fulfill this important community tradition and culture.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the precolonial period through to the colonial period, most of the pastoral communities lived peacefully. There were cases of cattle raids reported but they were primarily for replenishing purposes after natural calamities and were far in between. The upsurge in banditry and cattle rustling with devastating effects were witnessed due to several causes like competition for diminishing resources. As the number of occupants also increased, acts of lawlessness seem to have gone up. Whatever is taught to the youth in initiation camps that take place after circumcision seem to have a great effect on their way of thinking too as they come out and wreak havoc on their supposedly peaceful neighbours. The study also sought to find out the influence of traditional culture on the banditry attacks and concluded that, among other factors, dowry payment demands and the constant encouragement of the youth to look for bride price were some of the main factors.

Therefore, since the bandit economy seems to thrive in the lowlands because of these factors that can be mitigated by policies and rule of law by the government, there is need for the community members to be encouraged to turn to modern ways of fulfilling cultural demands like dowry. The government should also introduce alternative sources of livelihood for these communities.

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