

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RESPONSE TO FAMINE IN SEMI ARID AREAS OF NORTH WEST, KENYA

Juma Richard Otieno

Senior Lecturer Department of Liberal Studies, School of Business and Economics,  
Murang'a University of Technology, Kenya

### ABSTRACT

*This paper analyses behavioral patterns which emerges in the process of adjustment to stem the negative effects of famine in semi-arid areas in North West, Kenya occupied by Turkana pastoralists. The paper takes a more qualitative approach, focusing on richer and deeper interview data. It looks at issues surrounding change, aiming to better understand how people living in semi-arid areas in North West, Kenya (basically pastoralists) respond to famine. It is argued that the economic disaster which pastoralists in North West, Kenya face as a result of famine make it imperative for them to seek out ways of topping up their household food reserves. This they do through a number of adjustments mechanisms whose analysis is the subject of this paper. The pastoralists are generally known as opportunists taking advantage of various options for subsistence, which again is an adaptation to the risks of their environment. The analysis is based primarily on the interpretation of the questionnaire interview responses.*

**Keywords:** Famine, Livelihood Strategies and Social Relations

### 1. INTRODUCTION

All over the world, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, peasants and pastoralists practice livestock-grain, trade and exchange connections (Nikola 2006). Traders may act as middlemen, or the people may barter directly, thus personalizing the exchange. Gift exchanges are also part of the glue of social networking in many cultures and induce an expectation of reciprocity (Johnson and Bond 1974). In cattle keeping societies, livestock association and bride-wealth exchange are common. Goldschmidt (1969, 1976) observed that among the Sebei pastoralists in Uganda (called Sabaot in Kenya), close reading of a man's animals is a record of the major social interaction of his life. Among the Pokot, Turkana's neighbours and 'enemies' to the south, the tilia gift exchange starts at the age-set initiation, establishing a lifelong link between a young man and an influential elder who continue to exchange animals (Schneider 1957). In North West Kenya, intra-regional exchanges of livestock, food, and gifts have flourished since time immemorial, basically in times of local drought, famine, disease or raids. In the past, when crisis looms, one could go to his associates to beg for animals or food or to share pastures. As for the pastoralists in Turkana, they constantly "beg" (akilip) or ask for things from each other, and asking for assistance is not only a way of getting livelihood support during crisis, but also to initiate friendship which they could depend on in the future. Although true 'loans' of stock are not common, if one friend is in a time of hardship, he may 'borrow' a goat to slaughter and then the next year he will repay with another goat. Gulliver (1951, 1955) also points out that, in the past, each individual herder had a network of associates who served as a type of insurance policy. Gulliver estimated that an average

herder had about 30 associates, but did not estimate the average number of bond-friends, giving only one example of a man who had three (Gulliver 1951: 104-105). It is these kinds of human relationships, and their impacts on during famine that form the center of the discussion in this paper.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Trade Ties and Symbiosis

During famine, previous ties with the traders and businessmen in the district, and symbiotic relations with the Merille of Ethiopia are revitalized and exploited to the full as survival strategies adopted by the famished pastoralists. Many famished pastoralists households go across river Omo into Ethiopia either to trade or beg food from affines. Those who are traders use skins, ornaments or cash to buy food. They also buy sorghum, and maize meal. For instance, Turkana pastoralists, household heads send their sons or wives to look for food. However, in case of major famine, there is mass emigration of famished Turkana pastoralists who want to settle temporarily in Merilleland to take advantage of a better food situation across the border. The Ethiopian government is also reported to airlift food from Addis Ababa into her border with Kenya twice a week. Though Kenya's security at the Numurupus border post refuse to allow such mass emigration for reasons which the respondents were unaware of. Movement in small groups for the purpose of trade is, however, permitted. Through this, the Ethiopian government, by default rather than design, help to feed the famine stricken pastoralists. It is also worth noting that symbiotic relationships have existed between the Turkana and the Merille for as long as the two pastoral

communities have existed as neighbors. The Turkana traded with the Merille and sometimes settled among them during such periods of hardship. The data reveal that such symbiotic relationships still exist between the two communities (Turkana and Merille) and are useful during famine. Respondents also outlined that during famine, there is increased dependence on the Somali (oria) traders who travel with their merchandise in large trucks to the countryside and bartered them for goats, hides and skins. Similarly, the pastoralists forge greater ties with the various market and rural centres where they sell their hides, and skins to traders for cash. The cash income is then used for procuring essential commodities from the local commercial stores. From these transactions, the Turkana people are able to maintain a fairly steady supply of maize meal, salt, tobacco, and other essential commodities.

**2.2: Splitting Herds and Families**

In pastoral communities, the practice of splitting herds and families is a dominant feature of life. This is done in relation to spatial and temporal variability of the rangeland vegetation. Turkana people believe that splitting herds conserve and safeguard range resources from being degraded and overgrazed in an irreversible way. During famine periods, local people develop an elaborate herd splitting strategy, and herds and flocks are split in base camps and satellite camps. Milking and young animals are tended as base herds closer to the village by young girls and boys. Immature flocks before the age of puberty are tended by older boys at a relatively far distance from the settlement, and less productive but strong herds are sent as satellite herds to remote areas and managed by adults. It should be noted that base camp and satellite herd sizes are dynamic, and are determined by factors such as availability of feed, water, and labour. For instance, due to the lack of enough water and pasture during famine periods, there is usually a shift of part of the base camp herd to a satellite herd leading to an increase in satellite herd size. I would argue here that such movements could be harnessed in future as an early indicator of emerging intensity of famine crisis for timely drought contingency planning and intervention in North West, Kenya. However, the kind of splitting families which emerges during famine among the famished Turkana pastoralists is entirely new. It is done specifically to prevent depletion of existing household food resources. The data is particularly rich in cases of children who had been sent off either to kinsmen, friends, or school as a survival mechanism for sloughing off population from the pastoral sector. One respondent stated as follows: Before the famine I had 15 cattle, 60 sheep and goats,

and seven donkeys. After the famine, I remained only with six cattle, 25 goats and sheep and three donkeys. Therefore, my second wife and her four children went to Lodwar town to look for work. She works for a trader there. I stay here at the village with my first wife. She has five children in all; one is with us here and four we sent to school. Unless the family is split, it would be difficult for us to survive.

As stated above, the unique way of splitting family during the famine is the practice of sending off children to school due to lack of pastoral duties and the shortage of food. The school becomes popular at such times because in nearly all the primary schools in the district, the children are fed by the government or missionaries. The school enrolment rises during famine and probably decreases in more prosperous times. For instance, the total school enrolment (primary and secondary) in the District was projected to rise to 39,949 in 2006 from 27,411 in 2002 (Republic of Kenya 2002). Respondents explained that 2004 was a prosperous year, while in 2005 and 2006, the drought and famine had stretched the pastoral economy to its limits. In 2006, the 10 public primary schools in the Turkana District were full and had nearly three times their authorized capacity (Republic of Kenya 2006). We could demonstrate this by examining the enrolment trend at Lokichar primary school during the 2005-2006 drought periods. The annual statistical returns obtained from the head teacher showed that the school’s enrolment for standard one to five rose from 58 pupils in 2004 to 142 in October 2005. This was a large increase of approximately 145 per cent. Table 1 illustrates the trend and shows that the school enrolment in 2005 was more than twice that of 2004. This, however, reflected the general trend in the whole of Turkana District during the same period. It was observed that during 2005-2006, there was drought and famine. Therefore, the Kenya Government was providing free food to those pupils attending schools, and this could have facilitated high enrolment.

**Table 1: Lokichar school enrolment by sex, 2004-2005**

|      | Class 1 |       | Class 2 |       | Class 3 |       | Class 4 |       | Class 5 |       |
|------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|
|      | Boys    | Girls | Boys    | Girls | Boys    | Girls | Boys    | Girls | Boys    | Girls |
| 2004 | 18      | 11    | 15      | 4     | 4       | 6     | 0       | 0     | 0       | 0     |
| 2005 | 53      | 25    | 28      | 9     | 14      | 5     | 4       | 1     | 3       | 0     |

Table 1 shows that although there was an increase in the number of students seeking enrolment during the 2004-2006 drought and famine period, the number of boys was slightly higher than that of girls. This could also be explained by the fact that there were limited herding

activities for boys due to losses of livestock which resulted from drought and famine conditions. The lower classes, particularly class 1, attracted more pupils than any of the other classes. Loki char primary school was, in 2005, forced to run two streams of class 1 due to this sharp rise in enrolment. The rush for learning places at Lokichar primary school in order to ease the consumption strain on household resources could further be depicted in Table 2.

**Table 2: total enrolment per year of study at Lokichar primary school**

| Year of study | 2004 | 2005 |
|---------------|------|------|
| 1             | 29   | 78   |
| 2             | 19   | 37   |
| 3             | 10   | 19   |
| 4             | 0    | 5    |
| 5             | 0    | 3    |

Source: Fieldwork, 2007

Table 2 further illustrates that Turkana children do not further their education to the higher classes, and that enrolment continues to diminish from class 1 to class 5. It is also observed that the enrolment is simply sporadic in response to drought crisis, after which the children leave school and go back home to undertake pastoral duties. Therefore, it could be summarized that, to a large extent, schools played a critical role as a survival strategy during the 2005-2006 drought and famine period.

### 2.3 Pooling Resources

There is evidence which suggest that during and after famine, herders join together in corporate groups and pool their surviving stock in order to exploit economies of scale. The respondents said that once the livestock have been pooled, they are left in the hands of a few selected men or families in the pasturelands as the rest move in search of food. Migrants similarly leave their families and livestock with kinsmen and neighbours or friends as they go out in search of employment and other income generating activities. The respondents went on to explain that this mechanism of pooling resources during and after famine or loss of livestock from catastrophes is customary. Historically, the able bodied but dispossessed pastoralists ‘would leave behind whatever had remained of their stock and “disappear” into distant lands to settle and work there temporarily. Most of them would emigrate to Merilleland in Ethiopia. Written evidence exists to this effect (Turkana Political Records. Miscellaneous: 1971-1943 File No.TURK/59, DC/TURK 3/1).The dispossessed would live among the Merille for as long

as the economic hardships lasted, which would be upto two years. When more prosperous times returned, they would collect their ‘pay’ and gifts in livestock and return to Turkanaland to re-enter the mainstream of pastoral life. This was quite similar to what other nomads such as the Gabra and the Maasai do in response to famine. According to respondents, those who leave during famine would receive their share of the built up livestock from the pooling system when they return. A study by Laughlin and Brady (1978) illustrates how, when ecological or political stress increases for a population, the initial response is for its people to pull together, set aside hostilities and grievances, and pool resources. After a peak of cooperation, if the stress continues in the extreme, concern for family and, ultimately, concern for oneself overtakes concern for group survival. Group cohesion therefore weakens and can even fall apart. The idea does not exactly fit the Turkana: although their condition during famine is full of stress, their social structure reflects more independence and flexible small units than group solidarity. However, as friendly cooperation does take place among kin, neighbors, and friends.

### 2.4 Reciprocity and Exchange

In Turkana society, there is a difference between ‘asking’ (akilip) for an animal and ‘exchanging’ (akilokony) an animal. When a man ‘asks’ for an animal, “he simply asks for it”. For example, he might say, “my children are hungry and I need a milking cow”. In such cases, “you do not tell the man you will give him something later”. To exchange (akilokony), one goes to a man who is known to have a surplus of the wanted or needed animals; if both parties are willing, an exchange is made. “Exchanging is like buying something” and both parties are mutual beneficiaries. Akilokony is a way to increase or diversify the herds. The concept of reciprocity is an important and often overlooked aspect of Turkana survival, but it is an essential aspect of their ability to survive their environment. To fully appreciate reciprocity in Turkana society, one must abandon western notions of the concept. Although westerners may value the concept, they do not practice it to the extent that the Turkana do during a crisis. The western/agrarian ideal of saving seems contradictory to the practice of reciprocity among Turkana pastoralists. Reciprocity is an intimate part of the social fabric of nomadic Turkana culture. It is altruistic behaviour and its benefits outweigh the costs. In Turkana, the cost, or risk, of not reciprocating is social ostracism. Generally, the act of reciprocity is uniformly adhered to in Turkana culture, and a herd owner can be confident that a gift

(cost) today will probably yield a greater needed gift-in-return (benefit) at some point in the future. In effect, the more one gives, the more (social) security one can accumulate for the future. Informants stated as follows:

People who do not reciprocate are not good. How can people survive if they do not reciprocate to those who gave to them when they were faced with a problem? When you go to someone's *awi* and they give you food when you don't have any, you need to reciprocate when you do have some. Those who don't reciprocate are like wild animals. Next time you will not even talk to them (Household Interview 5th July 2007).

This Turkana behaviour of reciprocity is quite similar to what has been observed among other communities in Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, Mauss (1967) pointed out that in a number of civilizations, exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, but in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily. On reciprocity, a number of gifts are exchanged during famine. Respondents pointed out that Turkana society is organized around the allocation of resources through gifts: gifts are mostly distributed within the family and kin group and among friends and individuals when each other is in need and must be acknowledged for it. They mentioned that gift exchange is very common during crises, but also help in making and nurturing social ties. Approximately 95 percent of those interviewed said that when there is famine, they exchange some gifts with their friends and relatives through the traditional hospitality system. The major categories are shown in Table 3. Similarly, they indicated that they could not remember having given away much due to the depletion of their household. Moreover, respondents reiterated that the mass wandering and dispersals due to famine tend to bring friends and relatives together, making immediate contact and exchange of gifts feasible.

By far the most common gifts exchanged between friends and relatives were goats, donkeys, food, and tobacco (mentioned by 90 per cent of all the respondents). 56 per cent of residents gave their bond friends and relatives goats and donkeys, while 75 per cent of respondents received, and 25 per cent gave goats and sheep and donkeys, which indicates that animals still hold reasonably a high value among the Turkana during times of crises. But all the 88 respondents pointed out that reciprocity involving the exchange of livestock gifts was not very popular during severe famine conditions. This is because it works best in building up the herds after a famine rather than as a source of subsistence. The exchange of livestock usually

begins among kinsmen, affines, and trusted bond friends on a noticeable scale following heavy rains which shows anticipation for a return to full-scale pastoral life. When the respondents were asked to confirm or deny Henriksen's (1974) findings that the cessation of reciprocity forces poor Turkana to fall off the exchange network, respondents noted that with respect to famine, there is no such thing as "falling off", for the majority of people are almost equally hard hit. Turkana culture prohibits asking for help from a neighbor, kinsman or friend who is himself a victim of disaster; you console him or her, you do not beg from him. To do so is viewed culturally as anti-social and insulting. Therefore, analysis of the mode of reciprocity and exchange during famine brought to the foreground the following observations:

- i. In history, Turkana pastoralists have traditionally operated with a minimal involvement in the monetary economy. The preferred means of acquiring food has been through trade or begging rather than direct purchase, thus avoiding the use of money. However, during the fieldwork, I learnt that 20 percent of the respondents indicated that money is one of the gifts to their bondfriends. I argue here that this is an indicator of the increasing gradual incorporation of the Turkana people into the Kenyan national economy. If this trend continues, as in other parts of the World, exchanges among pastoralists may become more and more depersonalized.
- ii. Gift exchanges in Turkana during crises are voluntary and between two individuals. The exchanges do oscillate: in several cases, my respondents replied they were "still waiting for the rains" to go to visit and beg from or exchange gifts with their friends. Because of long distances between friends and a scattered population in Turkana, exchanges are not as frequent as other communities with denser populations. Animals are also larger gifts during crises than a plate of food passed to friendly neighbours.
- iii. Gift exchanges in Turkana during crises are mostly asymmetrical and reciprocal, but leaders and rich people are expected to give more to others. Some leaders (e.g. local chiefs and clan elders) informally told me that many more people beg from them during crises (and they give) than the few they consider to be their true bond friends. It is possible that more people consider wealthy Turkana to be their friends than vice versa. These relations could be considered asymmetrical.

Therefore, given the prominence of exchange relationships among the respondents during famine

periods, it becomes prudent to locate the various friends the respondents depended on.

### 2.5: Geographical dispersal of bond-friends of all the respondents.

The Turkana possess an intimate knowledge of their physical environment, for their survival has depended on skilful management and movement. They also have very detailed social maps (mental maps) of geographical areas through which they have travelled on foot. All topographical features (e.g. hills, rocky outcrops, and stream beds, plain) and areas have place names. The Turkana adults possess this knowledge, as they spend most of their lives herding nomadically. Dyson Hudson (1982) documented that the Turkana people have accurate ways of communicating information about space. From the case histories compiled during the survey interviews, Turkana special friends live in a wide geographical area, and these special friends are sought during hardship. For instance, during famine, there are always mass movements in search of special friends. These migrations are determined by the individual's environmental perception, and most important, the existence of friends, kinsmen or affines at the receiving end. Those who have once migrated said that it was not just a plunge into the unknown wilderness. They knew where they were going and they believed before setting off that they would find friends to welcome and give them hospitality. For instance, one respondent told a story of how he walked from the Kenya-Sudan border to Kitale town (located in the southern part of Turkana District) in search of employment. But it took him nearly one month to reach Kitale town because the journey was made in stages. He walked to Kakuma, then to Lodwar, later to Katilu, and finally through West Pokot to Kitale. At these named stopping places, he stayed a couple of days with a friend, a kinsman or affine before proceeding further. The respondent had hoped to settle at Kipsongo, a Turkana slum in Kitale town. However, the respondent didn't get to his relative at Kipsongo slum. He was arrested by Kenyan police, accused of loitering, and jailed for three weeks. Upon his release, he returned to back to Turkana with the aim of returning to full-scale pastoralism. It is important to note that though many immigrants knew where their friends were, the interviews also revealed that on certain instances, the migrants merely exploited fictive kinship ties to find a place to stay while looking for a job or waiting to move to the next stopping place. For instance, one of the respondents who walked to Kitale said as follows:

I used to hear that a distant cousin had settled in Kitale with his family after the drought and famine of 2000. I

had hoped to trace him and ask for his help in getting a job (Household Interview 14th May 2007). Another respondent narrated how he walked down the Lokikipi plains to Kakuma through Lokitaung and Kakuselei down to Lokichar village. This respondent appeared to have experienced a more difficult time than many of the migrants, for he was trekking with the whole family. The household ran out of food before reaching Kakuma at a place called Lekudule. He was then forced to prematurely marry out his eldest daughter (or was it pawning?) to a rich man in exchange for food. Two other younger sisters remained behind with the newly married daughter as the rest of the family continued south subsisting on bride wealth. Therefore, the data reveal that networking behaviour increases during famine. For example, the range of bond-friends for each of those interviewed was from 0 to 33 people. Only four of the 88 respondents replied that they had no bond friend. These four were key informants who claimed that their animals had died, and they were too old to walk long distances to visit others and make friendships. Each of the 84 respondents was quite specific when I asked "where do your special friends or bondfriends live?" A total of 64 places were named. Due to the fact that many of these places were rural and remote, we can assume that many of these bond-friends are still mobile pastoralists. Although the majority of the bond-friends are in a cluster surrounding, they still show a wider geographical dispersal. Most of the friends generally live in Ngibelai, Ngisonyoka, and Ngisetou territorial sections in southern Turkana, with a few in the northern Turkana towns of Kitale, and other locations in Kenya such as Maralal.

Further illustration shows that the respondents commonly have bond-friends in alternate directions, for example, from Kaling to the north, Riget to the east, and Kitale (outside Turkana) to the south. This dispersal is consistent with the pattern earlier observed by Gulliver in north Turkana (Gulliver 1951). It was also observed that men were favoured for bond-friends because the head of the household has the ultimate authority to decide who to visit, when to give, sell or slaughter an animal. Married women basically shared bond friends with their husbands. Those unmarried could share with their parents. There were cases where women developed friendships by giving beads, cooked food or grain, traditional containers for milk and fat, or other items from the household. I also observed that in cases of hardship, a young male would request a gift from his father and give to the parents of his adolescent girlfriend who are not part of his father's bondfriends. But this did not form part of the bride-wealth. This concurs with what Wienpahl discovered when he pointed out that among the southern Turkana, a male friend of an

adolescent girl may 'give' her an animal, and "there is no connotation of sexual relationships between female and male friends or 'best friends' Wienpahl (1984: 213).

### 3. CONCLUSION

The paper has shown an evidence which indicates that the famished Turkana pastoralists of North West, Kenya applies various ways of weathering the food crises during famine. Thus, they do not simply wait passively, but venture out creatively to find ways and means of survival. Their responses are complex, dynamic and pragmatic. The paper highlights the following: Firstly, that Turkana pastoralists apply a perceptual filter to the crisis before choosing any strategy. The decisions regarding pastoral strategies are based on their past experience and cultural interpretation of the crisis. These results suggest that measures should recognize the way Turkana people can use new opportunities in the interaction with the outside world. We have seen how during times of famine, households effectively used strategies such as sending children away to school or migrating temporarily for work in other regions. These could be enhanced through measures that build upon these interactions. Improvement of infrastructure is especially desirable. There is need for substantial investment in key infrastructures such as roads, trekking routes, and markets. Markets enable sales and exchange of livestock during drought and famine. However, Turkana people's ability to participate in the market depends on their physical capacity, education and skills. For instance, health and nutrition are integral aspects of the physical human capital which strongly influences the capacity of individuals to earn an income. Income earning opportunities and productivity also depend on their education and skills. This is why the promotion of market participation in the Turkana district has to be coupled with public programs and spending on health, education and social welfare which help to maintain and augment human capital in both its physical and intangible manifestations.

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