

# Live hood Strategies in North-Western Kenya: A Study of Turkana People's Customary Response to Famine

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyses the livelihood strategies of Turkana people of North-Western Kenya from the context of cultural modes of existence developed to weather the effects of food crises. The paper makes a thorough assessment to determine how effective some of these indigenous customary livelihood strategies still are at present times, and with what frequency and intensity they are being implemented. It is argued that Turkana peoples' social institutions act as a foundation of social capital which is traditionally a fundamental livelihood strategy. For example, territoriality and neighborhoods were units of identification in a given geographical space and enabled social forces such as ethnic groups to establish inter-unit relations in the utilization of resources. The organizational structure of splitting the family unit into grazing homesteads and browse homesteads was ecologically innovative, as it utilized the widely dispersed vegetation in order to meet the dietary needs of livestock. Labour organization within the family was geared towards the sustenance of the pastoral economy. Furthermore, the head of the household performed a supervisory role of herding, branding, and watering animals. Women performed the task of milking and watering young animals, while young girls assisted in fetching water, cooking, and herding goats and sheep. Young boys herded young stock, such as calves and lambs. Stock associateship enabled individuals to widely disperse livestock among affinals in order to prepare against instant decimation of livestock by ecological disasters such as famine and drought. It also enabled individuals to establish social bonds and reciprocal relations between contracting parties. Legality in Turkana society guided individuals in the utilization of the pastoral resources such as water, salt licks, and grass. It enabled them to contain deviant behaviour and to resolve conflict. The same social institutions such as kinship and rangeland territoriality were the basis of organizing sustenance in producing activities such as pastoralism. They were also the basis of identity and legitimization of the Turkana social and economic quests. The Turkana also believed on the high God to bless them with the domestic stock and abundant grass, drive away diseases and multiply and fatten their domestic animals.*

**Keywords:** Livelihood strategies, famine, Pastoral, Social organization

## 1. Introduction

A study by Gulliver (1951) found that Turkana people like other pastoralists in Sub-Saharan Africa, experienced food shortages during the pre-colonial period. This argument is supported by Lamphear (1992) who emphasized that it would be incorrect to conclude that life in Turkana was without problems prior to the colonial era. Gulliver (1951; 1955) maintained that, because of the highly vulnerable resource base and recurrence of famine, local people adapted by developing a series of socio-cultural activities.

For instance, the Turkana people evolved social structures aimed at well balanced resource utilization and equitable distribution of resources. Some of the social institutions considered in this paper are the family, kinship, age-set organization, neighborhood (*adakar*), territorial divisions (*ekitela*), and stock associateship (*lopae*). There were also judicial institutions that regulated conduct, provided guidelines and resolved conflicts arising out of resource utilization. These issues are discussed with the aim of demonstrating that, although Turkana pastoralists lived in a hostile environment, they had means and ways of surviving when disaster struck.

## 2. Social Organization

The Turkana people had flexible social organizational structures which enabled them to respond to unpredictable ecological variables (Gulliver 1955; Lamphear 1992). According to UNICEF (2006), majority of the Turkana

population still lives a nomadic livelihood and function within these same traditional institutions. Therefore, the social organization of the Turkana, as presented in this paper, is not merely a social heritage that has evolved and had been sustained over centuries of adaptation to the environment; it is also about the Turkana today. Moreover, their social organizational structures are presented as institutions that enable them to facilitate the organization of subsistence production activities. The major social institutions of the traditional nomadic Turkana are (with the local term listed in the singular) as follows:

- a) The family (household) unit (*awi*) and satellite camps (*abor*)
- b) Clans (*emachar*)
- c) The 'neighborhood' or 'traditional grazing association' (*adakar*)
- d) Livestock association and bond-friendships (*lopae*)
- e) Territorial sections (or 'subsections') (*ekitela*)
- f) Generation sets or 'alternations' (Gulliver 1951; Soper 1985)

### 2.1 Household unit *Aw*

The Turkana people refer to a household by the general word *awi*. Gulliver (1955) further describes a Turkana *awi* as a 'nuclear family' which is an independent, corporate kin group, specifically identified by its ownership and use of herds of domestic livestock. An *awi* is composed of a man, his wife, their children, and, quite often, a number of dependants who may include widows or related unmarried men and women.

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The head of the *awi* performs a supervisory role. He supervises herding activities such as watering animals and the castration of male animals. He also assesses the status of pastures before a homestead can be relocated. He also has to authorize the slaughter of an animal for a ritual or gifted as part of bride wealth or compensation for injury or offence committed by a member of the household or stock associates (Gulliver 1955). McCabe (1983) also emphasized how the lack of hierarchy in Turkana social organization allows for each individual (herder) household head to quickly respond to social or ecological change, according to the needs of his family and animals.

The family has two homesteads (*awi*); one in the mountains called the grazing homesteads (*awi nepoli*), where young boys and men graze animals; and the other 'a browse homestead' (*awi neengos*), occupied by the head of the family, wives and children (Gulliver 1955). If shelters are built by accompanying women, the satellite camps are termed *awi*. If the young male herders are not accompanied by women and do not bother to build shelters, the satellite camps are termed *abor* (Dyson-Hudson and McCabe 1981). During the rains, a family usually comes together in its *ere*, or wet season pasture area, when dietary needs of stock can be met in a small locality. Gulliver (1951), Dyson-Hudson and McCabe (1981), and McCabe (1983) outlined that nomadic families, such as the Turkana, may move from five to fifteen times a year.

## 2.2. Clanship (*emachar*)

At birth, a child becomes a member of his or her father's clan. Male children retain the membership of their father's clan for life, while female children, in marriage, take up membership of the household's clan. There are 28 exogamous clans among the Turkana people (Gulliver 1951). Clans act as units of cooperation in case of compensation for injury or offence committed by a member of the clan. Clan members collectively pay for the offence in the form of stock (Gulliver 1951). When death of the head of the household occurs, clan members oversee proper distribution of property and livestock among household members.

A clan's identity is expressed by slight variations in clothing, custom, and livestock brands (Barret 1988; Gulliver 1951). The livestock brands are used to identify and claim animals if they have strayed away, been stolen or even to eat in times of dire need. When stock changes hands, the brands are left untouched, so that in every clan there are livestock with other clans' brands (Soper 1985).

## 2.3. Neighborhood (*Adakar*)

The Turkana word for neighborhood is *adakar*. It is derived from *Adak*, meaning to graze or browse, also translated as 'traditional grazing association'. According to Gulliver (1955), neighborhood refers to a distinct group of homesteads or common areas of grazing. It is a loose grouping of *awis* of friends and relatives, which may move together to follow new pastures. According to informants, there may be three or four homesteads strategically grouped at central points, such as in a valley or along a main water

course. These grazing associations, or neighborhoods, are often a temporary expression of more permanent ties between relatives, in-laws, and friends. *Adakars* vary in size from a few to several hundred-member households and are headed by strong personalities assisted by a council of men. *Adakar* can be led jointly by both a general and *Emuron* (*seer*), whereby the general unites their group of *awis* (households) for military strength, and the *Emuron* guides and blesses the combat activities of the general (Gulliver 1955). Gulliver (1951) identified two categories of neighborhoods among the Turkana. These are primary and secondary neighborhoods. Primary neighborhoods are small groups of homesteads in a given geographical locality such as on a plain. The homestead may number up to three households which are located about 500m apart. A secondary neighborhood may be comprised of up to two or three primary neighborhoods in an area of about 10km<sup>2</sup>. The homesteads are geographically close to each other and use the same water points and pastures or grazing areas (Gulliver 1955).

Neighborhoods provide some security from possible raids by bandits or neighboring tribes. Neighborhoods also play a regulatory role governing access to water, pasture, and general natural resource use by all members in a given geographical area. For example, during a prolonged drought, members from primary and secondary neighborhoods may use the same pastures and water points. Apart from sharing resources, homesteads share corporate responsibility for maintaining water holes (Gulliver 1951). They act as a corporate system whereby members share food such as meat, milk, and grain in adverse ecological conditions. For example, heads of households would slaughter animals in turn and share meat with all members of the neighborhood. Neighborhoods also perform social roles or functions. Converging points in a neighborhood such as water pools become centres for the dissemination of information on the state of pastures, timing of feasts, raiding plans or a place to barter goats, skins for grain or iron ware (Gulliver 1951).

A neighborhood is not a permanent social institution. It breaks up often and units would regroup in response to environmental changes. Changes in climatic conditions such as the change from wet to dry season pastoral conditions result in the movement of homesteads and hence the disintegration of neighborhoods. Gulliver (1951) reported that the composition and locations of neighborhoods fluctuates widely from year to year.

## 2.4. Stock-Associates

Stock-associateship has been a practice among the Turkana people since pre-colonial times, and were not formed strictly within Turkana borders. These configurations are a major institution of collaboration among individual Turkana herders. It includes relatives and special friends whose relationships are built or strengthened by mutual assistance or the gift exchange of stock animals. One may seek stock in time of need and give stock when others are in need (Gulliver 1955). According to Turkana people, when stock is depleted by epidemics or failures of pastures or drought, a person with insufficient stock to warrant a separate camp of his own would put his stock together with other stock

associates to minimize the risk of disease or loss from raiding. Therefore, stock associatship is the core of social relations among the Turkana people whereby one may attend feasts and get food and shelter in the home of a stock associate. Each man's circle of stock associates is a different network, both socially and geographically, and provides him with a type of support structure and mutual insurance. Gulliver (1951: 104-105) estimated that each herder has about 30 stockassociates. The exchange of animals involves much begging (*Ngulip*) and argument, which the Turkana enjoy.

Gulliver (1955) identified two categories of stock associatship among the Turkana. The first category involves close agnates (*Ngitungakan-my people*), such as in-laws. In this category, reciprocal rights would involve gifts of cattle and the relationships are intense, reliable, and persist for a long time. The second category of stock associatship involves acquaintances or strangers (*Ngikolomata*). Reciprocal gifts would involve goats or sheep. The relationship diminishes with time and eventually dies (Gulliver 1955).

Turkana people have no corporate institutions to administer justice, and according to Gulliver (1955), they do not perceive crimes to be committed against 'society' but by one individual against another. Because most disputes involve livestock (e.g. theft), each person's stock associates are his support structure in adjudication for a major offence. Compensation for injury or settling disputes is also payable in stock. In compensation, the offender has to seek the assistance of his stock associates. Interestingly, many respondents stated that the most common method of dealing with minor conflicts and stresses is to simply move away (Gulliver 1955).

## 2.5. Bond-friendships (*Lopae*)

A *lopae* is a special bond-friend (or 'best friend'), and someone in this relationship has a right to demand an animal in time of need, and an obligation to give into his bond-friend's need. In the pre-colonial period, bond-friendships were not restricted to Turkana borders (Gulliver 1955).

Reciprocity was displayed over time if the friendship was to continue. In a year of poor rainfall or local disease outbreak, Turkana must seek alternate pastures or restock their herds, and for this, they go to their *lopae* for help and support. A woman may have her own *lopae*, and share her husbands or husband's with another woman (Gulliver 1955).

## 2.6. Territorial sections (*ekitela*) among the Turkana

The Turkana people are divided into two groups or sections, namely: Ngimoni (little) and Ngikuro (waterfalls). Each of these sections is sub-divided into various territorial sections and divisions. A territorial section may cover 50-100 miles and may comprise of an approximate population of 10-20,000 persons (Gulliver 1951). Each Turkana person is a member of one of 19 territorial sections, spatially vague areas without well-defined boundaries or any concept of exclusive grazing or watering rights (Lamphear 1992).

Territoriality is highly transitory and randomly formed. Individuals move out of the territory in accord with nomadic patterns (Gulliver 1955). According to Gulliver (1951), territorial sections are formed after habits and socio-economic activities established that are peculiar to each locality. For instance, the Ngithonyoka Turkana in the southwest of the Suguta river, draw their territorial name derived *ngut* (greed) and *inyo* (grass). It means that they are always greedy for better grass in the suguta valley, and are eager to dislodge other sections of the Turkana from the area. The territorial name of the Ngimazuk Turkana have their territorial name ('mazuk') derived from trade. The Ngimazuk Turkana was among the first sections of the Turkana to contact Swahili and Arab traders in the region.

Gulliver (1951) and Lamphear (1992) identify a number of territorial sections and their locality. For example, among the Ngimoni (little) Turkana there are, among others, the following territorial sections: *Ngiepakuno* (cutters of *ekunoit*) trees are located in the north of Lodwar and the *Muruassigger hills*; *Ngissiger* (dressed up people) are in the vicinity of Lodwar, *Peleketch Mountains*, and *Kaliow range*; *Ngibochoeros* (paupers) inhabit the area around the shores of the Lake Turkana. The *Ngijie* (the fighters) are in the northwest Turkana; the *Ngkwatella* Turkana inhabit *Gatome valley*, the *Lorienatom mountains*, and *Logitippi swamp*; *Ngimazuk* (dealing with early traders) inhabit the northwest Turkana District; *Ngatunyo* (lions) are in the Central Turkana; and *Nyangangatank* (yellow calves) in northwest Turkana. Among the *Ngicuro* Turkana are the following territorial sections: *Ngilukomomg* (oxen with sweeping horns); *Ngiwoyakwara* (the long spears) in northwest Turkana; *Ngamaloik* (the diviners) at *Murerissand* *Turkwel river*; *Ngbelai* (the broken fighting sticks); and *Ngebotook* (paupers) who inhabit the south west of *Kolosia*.

Territorial sections give its members social identity; those who belong to the same territorial section have similar social activities and a sense of protection. Members of the territorial section would be identified by the way they brand domestic animals, body decoration and socio-economic activities that are common to them. Territorial sections define limits of ownership or accessibility of members to pastures, water, and salt licks. In principle, territorial members have inalienable rights to pastoral resources, but there are internal mechanisms that control movements of stock and people to various grazing areas within the group (Gulliver 1951). Elders have the customary right to determine patterns of movement to safeguard scarce grass and water from being exhausted particularly in the dry season. There are, for example, grass reserves on mountains and hill tops that would not be used until the dry season period.

Territorial units bar or exclude non members from their grazing zones. But only under exceptional circumstances would outsiders be allowed into a territorial section. Outsiders have to seek permission from the group and perform certain customary rituals. They have to kill a bullock and provide tobacco for the elders of the section into which admission is sought. After careful vetting they would be allowed into a territorial section and hence access to pastoral resources. It is also worth noting that, although

territorial sections do not fight each other, but together they feel animosity toward competitive neighbouring enemy tribes (Gulliver 1951).

### 2.7 Age-set Organization

There are two generation sets in the Turkana pre-colonial society, namely stone (*imuru*) and leopards (*eriait*) which alternate generations in each family (called age-set by Gulliver (1951) and alternations by Soper (1985). Generation-sets function as groups only during initiation or other ceremonies and raids (Gulliver 1951; 1955).

Entry into the age-set is determined at birth, and every male child become a member of the opposite age set of the father. For example, if the father is initiated into the stone age-set, the male child will be initiated to the leopard set. Female children are not initiated into age-sets although immediately after marriage they take up the age-set of their husbands (Gulliver 1951).

Each age-set has distinct characteristics. Those belonging to Stone Age sets wear hats with black ostrich feathers, while those belonging to leopard age sets adorn themselves in white ostrich feathers, silver bracelets, and leopard skins. They also sing different war songs and sit separately during rituals and feasts (Gulliver 1951). For instance, at a tender age, both members of stone and leopard age-sets are called *epithe* or 'child in arms'. It means that they are unable to wield spears and protect society from external aggression. Initiation takes place between 16-20 years when those who belong to a specific epithet move into the next social category known as warriors (*ngabana*). Initiation takes place after four years, and the core of the initiation ceremony is the spearing of a male animal (ox, camel, he-goat or ram) by each initiate. This is followed by a purification ritual and a feast of the slain animals by initiates and members of the senior age sets. By getting married and building a homestead, a *ngabana* becomes *ngiliok* (a full-fledged warrior). He slaughters a bull in front of witnesses, and this constitutes right of admission for a married man to enter the *ngiliok* class. From *ngiliok*, there are no further rights of passage. One becomes *gathika* (senior member) by age (Gulliver 1951).

One of the major functions of age-sets according to respondents is raiding to acquire territory, pasture, water supply, and animals, and to protect these from external aggression. Warriors are always ready to fight and defend homesteads, herds, pastures, and water points. Age-set systems built on the basis of military activities for raiding to acquire stock and pasture and kill enemies. The elder men from clans and generation-sets are also asked to say traditional prayers at these events (Gulliver 1951). Furthermore, members of the senior age sets are believed to possess mystic powers and are therefore deemed to be close to the high god (*akuj*). In the case of prolonged famine, the senior members intercede to bring rain and prevent the stock from dying. This is done through elaborate rituals. Senior age set members also perform an arbitration role between warring clans or individuals. Conflict normally arises over the use of pastures and water holes. A senior age-set member interposes his body between the warring functions

as a way of mediating a dispute. This can have consequences, occasionally including death, if the expected protocols are not adhered to by the warring parties. Age-set members assist each other in times of need. For example, when a member of a respective age-set is getting married, they give gifts of animals for bride wealth (Gulliver 1951). It is argued that age-set organizations act as an integrative mechanism in Turkana society.

### 3. Legality in the traditional Turkana Society

Turkana people have legal or moral mechanisms that guide the management of pastoral resources. The legal system also corrects defiant behaviour and forms the basis upon which disputes that arise over resource use can be settled. The Turkana precolonial legal system categorized laws or moral guidelines relating to preservation of the environment, accessibility of pastoral resources, and resolution of conflicts arising over resource use and disposal of property and inheritance. Laws that relate to, for example, the preservation of the environment ensures that certain trees and animals that have intrinsic value to the community are protected. Trees, such as hypaene and balanites are preferred for building with because they are termite resistant (Soper 1985). Customary laws prevented aimless cutting of these species of trees for any purpose other than building homesteads. Birds such as open hill, stork, marabou, and horn hill crow played an important role in the removal of ticks from animals and were therefore not supposed to be killed. Ecological conservation was engrained in religious beliefs and aimed at protecting areas regarded as sacred by the Turkana people. These include places of worship near rivers or water points. They also include areas where diviners reside such as sacred mountains or hills (Loima). Informants stressed that because of their religious beliefs, the Turkana people maintain restrictions over resource use in such places.

There were also legal mechanisms regulating access to pastoral resources. Firstly, one has to belong to the territorial section that claims exclusive rights, or this group has to be asked for entry. Secondly, as regards water, if a man digs or clears a waterhole (*aker*), under Turkana customary laws, he assumes ownership. Others have to seek permission before using such waterholes. However, water from natural springs or ponds (*kanamat*), such as Loritio on the Loima Mountains, was used on the basis of first come first served, because rights of ownership were vested in individuals or groups (Gulliver 1951). But during the dry season, pasture and water are scarce. Disputes often arise over access to pastures, salt licks, and watering points. Fighting over scarce pastoral resources between individuals or clans can sometimes lead to injury or death of some of those who were involved. If serious consequences result, the Turkana have elaborate mechanisms of legal redress. Where disputes lead to death, the offender, if caught at the first instance, would be killed, usually by a member or group of men from the community of the slain member. If the person responsible escapes, the case would be taken up by the stock group of the victim and presented to the council of elders (or tree of men). The stock group assists in paying for the offence (Gulliver 1951; 1955).

#### 4. Religious practice among the Turkana

In the pre-colonial period, the Turkana people had a religious system based on the conception that the high God (*akuj*) was the provider of domestic stock, pasture, and water, and that his intermediary was the diviner (*emuron*) (Gulliver 1951). They also believed that the high God had a large homestead with vast numbers of stock feeding on evergreen pastures. The Turkana people believed that, if they led a virtuous life, the high God would bless them with domestic stock and abundant grass, drive away diseases and multiply and fatten their domestic stock (Gulliver 1951).

The most renowned diviners in pre-colonial Turkana society were the Ekerua of the Loima Mountains in western Turkana, and the Lokorio of Atatepes. They were famous for rain making ability. The diviners would also foretell the future by looking at the entrails of slaughtered goats or by throwing sandals. The diviners would throw sandals in the air and could be able to foretell the future by looking at the way the sandals fell on the ground. For example, a diviner would predict the outcome of animal diseases, and possible raids from neighbouring tribes and recommend what actions should be taken. In case of possible raids, he would advise the people to move to secure areas or grounds, and in the case of animal diseases or severe drought, the diviner recommended appropriate sacrifices of domestic stock (Lamphear 1976; Muller 1989).

Divination was an important social institution in pre-colonial Turkana society. The office was not necessarily hereditary, as any person could be called by the high God to be a diviner. Once called on, the person would mysteriously disappear from the community and reappear after a considerable period of time. He would be able to predict, with some degree of accuracy, the occurrence of possible future events including famine occurrence (Gulliver 1951). These diviners became wealthy individuals and were influential in military and non military matters. After every successful raid, they received stock from raiders. They also charged a fee in the form of goats and sheep for the treatment of sick people.

#### 5. Conclusion

The analysis in this paper has important implications both for theory and policy towards nomadic pastoralism in general, and Turkana in particular. The findings have improved the theoretical understanding of adaptability for it has revealed that the Turkana pastoralists' like other pastoralists' elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, actively manipulate their social environment to maximize gain, which helps them to weather the negative effects of famine. Thus, the paper helps to enrich the literature on Turkana pastoralists' socio-cultural activities that helps them to respond to famine. The findings are particularly useful, for until now, we had not had detailed data on how the Turkana manage famine problems through their indigenous socio-cultural activities.

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