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Pastoralists of northern Kenya: Education as a response to a shifting socio-economic process

29th September 2005

Introduction

This paper is about the region lying to the north of Kenya, formerly known as the Northern Frontier District. The region mainly consists of arid and semi-arid lands. The main area of my focus will be Marsabit district although I will also mention parallels with Isiolo, Moyale, Wajir, Mandera and Garissa. The majority of the people in these districts are either Borana-speaking or Somali-speaking Cushitic people whose main source of subsistence is nomadic pastoralism. Towns such as Isiolo and Marsabit have highly mixed populations. Marsabit is one of the more than a dozen districts that constitute the eastern province of Kenya. It borders Moyale to the north, Isiolo to the south, Turkana to the west and Wajir to the East. It is an expansive area which is mainly arid, with the Chalbi desert being at the heart of the district. Most of the population in Marsabit (about 85%) keep livestock and participate in a form of pastoralist economy. A fair number of the population, especially on the arable highlands, practice mixed farming. The major crops being maize and beans, although nowadays there is a growing shift towards growing cash crops such as coffee and *khat* (leafy hallucinogenic substance chewed by many people in that area). Marsabit is home to a wide variety of pastoralist communities – namely Gabra, Rendille, Arial, Borana, Samburu – and other groups such as Burji, Konso, Turkana, Elmolo and Sakuye. The Gabra and Rendille are camel keepers and dwell in the harsher parts of the arid belt. The Borana are mainly concentrated on the Marsabit mountain area and the lowlands near there whilst the Samburu are found spreading towards Isiolo and Maralal to the south. Arial, who are thought to have emerged as a result of the Samburu and Rendille intermixing, are found in Laisamis and adjacent locations. The Burji were renowned farmers who were brought during the colonial period from Ethiopia by the British. They now represent a caucus of successful businessmen in both Moyale and Marsabit. In terms of general population and historical characteristics, Isiolo, Moyale and Marsabit share a lot in common. The three districts are mainly populated by the Borana – Oromo speakers with the Borana ethnic group being one of the most populous groups in the regions. Also the three districts are uniquely home to one of the largest concentrations of nomadic pastoralists in Kenya and in Africa.

However Isiolo town (about 50 kilometres from Meru) continues to develop as an important township in that region because it has relatively better road network, healthcare, and sanitation and education facilities than the other two districts. It has attracted mainly former pastoralists who lost their livestock to either drought or conflicts. Moyale is an important border town with Ethiopia and has over the years seen an increased growth in both its population and the town's size due to influx of mainly Gurreh refugees from Ethiopia. This influx and other related reasons led to conflicts between the Borana and Gurreh in the early 1990s. Although pastoralism is

still key engagement of the people in Moyale, commercial enterprise and farming plays an important role.

During the colonial period, the three districts were part of the wider Northern Frontier District and were thus grossly underdeveloped. The roads, schools, healthcare systems and other infrastructure that were developed and enjoyed in the coffee and tea producing parts of Kenya, did not reach the northern region. The aridity, the difficulty of the terrain, the porous border and the 'warlike' groups of the north perhaps made the region unfavourable to the British. In post-independence Kenya (more than 40 years now), very little has changed. Although there are more schools and larger settled populations the quality of life and the general infrastructure of the region remains undeveloped. Also the immediate post-colonial period of the 1960s saw the escalation of the infamous *Shifita* war, which led to the closure of the district by the then Kenyan government, and the wanton destruction of the pastoralism. It is believed that the pastoralists of places such as Isiolo, did not recover from the destruction of their wealth and the killings of the able-bodied men and women during the punitive expedition by the Kenyan government. Oba's summary, below, of the experience of the Obbu Borana of Sololo division of Moyale district succinctly paints a wider picture of the aftermath of the *Shifita* war in that region.

"Dramatic socio-economic transformation followed Kenya's independence in 1963. The undeclared war between Kenya and Somalia, known as the *shifita* conflict of 1964-1975 and a series of droughts ravaged the livestock, resulting in mass impoverishment. Most pastoralists were forced to settled down to grow crops to supplement the diminishing income from cattle. (1994:17)

Up to now, in Isiolo, Marsabit and Moyale, the landscape is dotted with the history of the Shifita War. This war is remembered as the Daba period or when 'Time Stopped'.

In terms of education opportunities in the three districts and Marsabit in particular, it appears that 'time did indeed stop' because the region lags behind other parts of the country hence reducing the chances of the young people from there benefiting from what is called the 'national cake'.

This paper is an attempt to outline the issues that affect the pastoralists of northern Kenya (with a special focus on Marsabit) and the impact of education in the context of changing socio-economic realities. It argues that in the current setting where pastoralism is declining and there is a movement towards economic, political and social integration with the wider Kenyan nation, people of this region will be disadvantaged if they did not have adequate education.

Illiteracy, Diseases and Poverty

Education, together with the fight against diseases and poverty, was identified, after Kenya's independence, as one of the three instruments for creating a progressive nation. It still has remained a major area of government investment as is evident in the number of many primary and secondary schools and universities having been established in various regions of the country. Obviously the assumption is that education is a means towards creating a population that is literate, employable and which can participate in the market-driven capitalist economy. Although the growth

of schools, colleges and universities within Kenya is highly laudable, one cannot say that this growth was equally distributed within the nation. There are higher disparities and regions such as the northern Kenya still lag behind. According to a report by Billow Kerrow that appeared in the *Daily Nation* newspaper recently, ‘...ninety-three percent of the population in northern Kenya is illiterate. For this large and arid part of Kenya, access, retention and completion of quality education remain major challenges. ‘ His main focus was the education of pupils in Mandera which also painted a general picture throughout the former Northern Frontier region. He adds that ‘...the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in the province’s 210 primary schools stood at 22 % in 2003, compared to the national average of 103%. For girls it was just below 16%. This is a scenario in which a paltry 14% of children have access to pre-school education.’

In Marsabit, an area of 66,000sq kilometres, with a population of nearly 130,000, there were about 55 pre-primary schools, 41 primary schools, 5 secondary schools and one polytechnic by 1996 (Marsabit District Development Plan, 1997-2001). Out of this about 28 pre-primary, 20 primary, 3 secondary schools and the single polytechnic were concentrated in the central division of the district. The other outlying divisions namely, Laisamis, Loiyangalani, Maikona and North Horr – which have mainly nomadic pastoralist groups – had fewer schools and teachers. In all the divisions of the district the statistics show a trend in which there are more boys enrolled in schools than the girls. The reason for this is complex but has something to do with girls either getting married young or parents investing in their boys so that on completing their education they can contribute directly to the family income. The district’s teacher to pupil ration stood at 1:35 but could be higher. Many schools do not have teachers specialised in the core subjects such as Mathematics, English, Biology, Chemistry or Physics – hence contributing tremendously to the final performance of the district and the region in the national examination league. For instance the last national primary examination league in 2003 showed that the ‘four districts (in northern Kenya, namely Garissa, Mandera, Ijara and Wajir) ranking at the bottom four (71st to 74th). This is also no far from the performance by Marsabit, Moyale and Isiolo. The recurrent picture is that for more than forty years of Kenya’s independence these primarily nomadic pastoralists’ districts have continued to be (collectively) at the lowest echelon of the education league. This point to a major hurdle(s) in the way of achieving quality education in the region.

Reasons for Under-achievement and Under-development

Various reasons have been given as to why regions of northern Kenya lag behind in terms of “development” in general and in terms of education, in particular. I argue that the region lags behind because of three main reasons:

1. lack of understanding by the Policymakers – the misconceived perception that nomadic pastoralism is a backward tradition that is anti-development.
2. poverty and poor investment in education and other infrastructure – fewer schools that are also not well equipped. No libraries. Universal free primary education – the impact will be for future studies to reveal. Poor families asked to pay fees hence hindering them from taking children, especially girls to school – give example of teaching in Isiolo where most of the girls were already “booked” to be married and were busy making “koreshea” than

reading for exams. Wealth and girls. No teachers for subjects such as English, Maths, Physics etc. going to Kenya. North eastern example. Schools in some other parts of Kenya have swimming pools! Talk of disparity.

3. the question of the future of pastoralism and lack of replacement with viable alternative e.g. Industries etc – even KMC which is now collapsed was located hundreds of kilometres away! Livestock Marketing Board – poverty has increased.

Policy issues

Governments have always been suspicious of nomadic population because it was not easy to confine them to specific political boundaries. In one of the District Socio-cultural Profiles released by the Ministry of Planning in 1986, the suspicion that groups such as those in Marsabit were culturally inclined more towards Ethiopia and Somali than towards other parts of Kenya was underlined by the following quotation:

“A cross-cultural programme between Marsabit and other districts of the land is wanted to teach the Gabra, the Burji, the Borana, the Konso, the Samburu, the Rendille and the Sakuye that heir cultures are similar to those of Nyanza, Central, Coast, Western, and Rift Valley Provinces. They should be discouraged from slavishly looking at the cultures of the neighbouring countries as the only sources of political and spiritual inspiration. They should only take from outside what can enrich the basic culture they already have in Kenya.” (1986:vii).

The report was compiled by among other scholars, an anthropologist who was my teacher. They should have appreciated the multi-cultural nature of Kenyan national polity and the fact that cultural forms and relations do not always conform to political boundaries. I gave that example to show how perhaps our national policy makers may have misunderstood the making of the nomadic societies. As has been noted by various scholars, pastoralists are neither backward nor lazy people. They actually work longer and harder than the average person working in an office. Pastoralism was the only viable form of economic survival that was open to the people who lived in the harsh arid and semi-arid lands. Their survival indicates their ability to adapt to their setting and to make the best use of the mostly non-arable lands that they occupied. The studies of pastoralist indigenous knowledge have revealed a very complex set of ideas and experience on issues ranging from animal husbandry, the exploitation of medicinal and food plants to conflict resolution. Development agents and policy makers failed to appreciate this element of nomadic pastoralist societies and instead pushed for agendas that were either seen as alien or too drastic for the target communities to take on board. It may sound hilarious, but to some pastoralist nomads the concept of Kenya as a nation, remained (perhaps still remains to others) an alien one. To the Turkana, Samburu, Rendille and Borana (among others) going to Nairobi is seen as “going to Kenya”. There is also a joke about a certain old woman in Moyale who during the first multi-party elections in 1992, wanted to vote for one Jomo for president. When she was told that he was dead, she asked to vote for Kenyatta instead!

In Kenya there is a lot of strength in identifying different regional needs and addressing them as unique within the nation. Although we are a nation there is meaningful mileage in addressing different development requirements using different approaches. For instance various policy documents revealed how difficult it was to provide education to children from nomadic background because of the seasonal movement of their families. However, in places such as Moyale and Marsabit

churches (mainly the Catholic church) made concerted efforts to establish integrated centres that offered health care, food and education to nomadic pastoralist groups. These centres became successful hub for education and trade as the nomadic groups established links with the churches. Now there are various church-sponsored schools in the three districts that have successfully educated a growing number of students. In the very recent years, new church-based schools such as St. Paul's Secondary school in Marsabit and the Machi centre in Isiolo have contributed positively to the education of the children in the area. More children from these schools are attaining grades that can at least enable them to attend tertiary colleges and some very few of them made it to the university.

To the contrary government-sponsored schools such as Marsabit Boys and Garba Tulla in Isiolo – the only national school in the entire northern rim of Kenya – are almost near total collapse. In its hey days of the early 1970s schools such as Marsabit boys was successful – perhaps because there were better teachers and teaching facilities provided at the time. Their star student remains, Hon. Bonaya Godana – in fact the motto there now is “Do as Godana Did”. A school such as Marsabit boys that produced several successful educators, civil servants and businessmen, is now almost unable to send one person to the university. The collapse of institutions nationally led to the collapse of schools and other institutions in marginal areas. Perhaps with the new government's initiative to fund the rehabilitation of schools (to the tune of Kshs100million) in the northern arid and semi-arid areas schools that produced excellent and successful leaders such as Garba Tulla, Marsabit Boys, among others will shine their lights again.

Poverty and poor investment

Extreme poverty, not only in the north but also in Kenya as a whole has had negative impact on education and other services. The recent economic survey report indicates that more than 13.5 million Kenyans lived below poverty level. Since that report was based on the statistics gathered around 1997, one could add that the figures may have gone up more than 10% more. On the average more than 55% to 60% of Kenyans live in abject poverty. The most recent UN report cites that Kenya has slipped 20 places down the poverty rankings of the world. One could only guess how many of those affected by the drastic increment in poverty are from the already poorer nomadic and semi-nomadic backgrounds. The decline of pastoralism coupled with the lack of a vibrant population engaged in the cash economy has exacerbated the levels of poverty in the northern arid regions. It is estimated that now nearly 75-85% of the population of the northern nomadic pastoralist may be living below poverty level – most of them living within what is termed as the ‘hardcore’ levels of poverty. Education is not entirely a free commodity so those living below the poverty line in one of the poorest countries in the world will not be able to afford good quality education. However one must congratulate the current government for its initiative to make primary education free for all the children in the country. Believe me such an initiative will go a long way in assisting so many children attain basic education – something that they would not have dreamt of some years ago. Secondary school education still remains expensive and unaffordable to many parents in Kenya. In the north, the nomadic pastoralist families have had to sell their cattle so as to educate their children. As a teacher in Isiolo I witnessed old Turkana women selling charcoal in order to pay fees for their children. Other single women sell *mirraa* or *khat* to fund their children's education. Other women engage in other dangerous practices especially in commuter

towns such as Isiolo, hence leading to the spread of HIV/AIDS and other new diseases that further complicate their already sorry situation.

Because secondary school education is not an end by itself, parents are at times forced to leave out girls and favour the boys instead. The argument being that a boy can always find some work and he will then send back the money home to help the family recover its wealth in cattle or help them build a house etc. Girls, it is commonly argued, will get married and leave the family. As a teacher in Isiolo, I realised that nearly half the girls in third and fourth form, were already engaged and hence had little interest in listening to the teachers. They would spend their weekends making '*koresheas*' in preparation to be housewives. The parents preferred getting the girls married because that would give the family some money and also an assurance that the girl will 'not be spoilt'. This trend is slowly changing but perhaps some sort of direct funding or support of girls' education in that region may help alleviate the existing negative trend.

The question of the future of pastoralism

For those of us who study pastoralist societies the shifting form and definition of the term 'pastoralism' has been part of the challenges. As aptly put by Baxter (1994:3) '...the words 'pastoralist' and 'pastoralism' need to be demystified. Both are only handy and very general descriptive terms, neither can be converted into a usable analytical category. To be a pastoralist, like being a teacher, a fisherman, a hunter, a development worker, a poet, a miner or a farmer, is simply to follow a particular occupation, job or profession.' It is true to follow this by saying that various governments continue to view pastoralism as unnecessary obstacle to 'development' – however that is defined. In Kenya then the only way to bring 'development'; to the northerners was to force people to settle in one place. This is demonstrated by the idea of building boreholes that were perceived to provide permanent supply of water. But what is water without grass to herds of cattle kept by pastoralist? Subsequently various other schemes such as the groups ranches among the Maasai have been implemented with mixed success.

Over the years through drought, increased poverty and deliberate and wrong government policy, the number of former nomads who settled in urban or peri-urban centres has increased. Most of them form a greater part of the urban poor especially in Marsabit and Isiolo towns. Girls and women find themselves engaging in prostitution and other forms of demeaning trades. Men either work as security guards or do odd jobs in the bigger towns such as Nairobi. The ecological and sociological shifts that have taken place, say in the last forty years, have had great impact on nomadic pastoralism in Marsabit and the whole of northern Kenya in general. These shifts have contributed to the 'decline' of pastoralism although, in relative terms, more people (about 85%) are still dependent on pastoralism in one form or another. So the question is what alternatives are there for people in the face of these drastic and monumental changes to their main subsistence? Farming, especially mixed farming is an alternative in the fertile regions of Marsabit but the rains are erratic and the land ownership issues have continued to lead to intra and inter-ethnic conflicts. Land issues have taken political dimensions and impacted gravely on the traditionally established inter-clan and inter-ethnic partnerships especially among the Borana and the Gabra of Kenya. Education and seeking employment in other regions of Kenya is another alternative to full dependence on pastoralism but there are fewer jobs in

Kenya and the majority of the students who completed secondary school in northern Kenya do not meet the criteria for joining colleges and other institutions of higher learning. The current increase in the qualification grade for teachers colleges among others will mean that even fewer students from the nomadic-pastoralist regions will make it to the teachers training colleges, among others. There are very few students from the north who attain grades between C to A in the national exams – unless a drastic measure is taken to either improve their performances or lower the entry grades for students from the region, post-secondary school education will only be a preserve of the very few students whose parents can afford private education. This jeopardises their chances of competing for the few employment opportunities in Kenya.

Expected output and recommendations

In a nutshell, if education is the path to the creation of a literate and successful community then more initiatives such as that the Universal Primary education need to be implement especially in regions of very low economic capability such as the arid and semi-raid ones. School facilities need to be improved and teachers provided especially in subjects such as science and English so as to enhance the children's ability to compete at the national level and enable them to join either tertiary colleges or universities to pursue professional careers. At the same time the question of the role of pastoralism in development need to be addressed because statistically more than 85% of people in Marsabit depend on this economy – making it the single largest subsistence economy in the district. A complete collapse of pastoralism will be catastrophic and could undoubtedly scatter any future hopes of developing a literate society in northern Kenya. As various pastoralist communities in Kenya and elsewhere in the region attempt to integrate with their other national ethnicities, it is inevitable that they will required to equip themselves with the tools of modern business – that is, education. Whether literacy and pastroalism can go hand in hand or not, is another question. But the truth is without knowledge of the current political, social and economic dynamics; nomadic pastoralists will be bound to lose in the end. It is that knowledge they ought to build as a measure to protecting their identities as pastoralists.