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The Cosmo-Politics of a Land Deal at the Kalobeyei Refugee Settlement in Turkana, Kenya

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This paper describes a case in which pastoralists alluded to occult forces in relation to a land deal for a new refugee settlement. In Turkana County, Kenya, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and its governmental partners have acquired 15 km² of land to implement the Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, an alternative model of refugee protection that is intended to foster a “hybrid community” between refugees and locals. While the settlement is designed to benefit the Turkana host community through business opportunities and urban development, many pastoralists are concerned about the ramifications for their livelihoods.

Drawing on 5 months of ethnographic research across 2016 to 2018, I investigate differences in the ways that the land deal is described by UNHCR, government, and local herders. I focus in particular on the narrative conveyed by a prominent Turkana diviner. During public discussions about a new refugee settlement in Turkana, this individual discussed ancestral spirits (*ng'ikaram*), witches (*ng'ikapilak*), and other more-than-human agents. I argue that his vivid depictions evocatively incorporate community concerns such as environmental change that initially seem unrelated to the land deal, while also challenging the economic rationalism that UNHCR and state authorities impose upon the democratic process of land negotiations.

Anthropologists working among Turkana pastoralists and their Ateker-speaking neighbours have often emphasised a tendency toward practical rather than “magico-religious” motives, describing them as “unimaginative, non-speculative” (Gulliver 1951) and adopting a “pragmatic mentality” about religious matters (Novelli 1999). However, the case study presented here suggests that this depiction of Turkana pragmatism can actually cause agencies to dismiss their allusions to non-Western ontologies as mere superstition. I argue that occult entities introduce uncertainty and challenge rationalist aetiologies, which makes them useful in articulating the links among environmental and political concerns in ways that disrupt dominant narratives.

Introduction

Turkana County in north-western Kenya has hosted the Kakuma refugee camp since 1992, and in 2015, an agreement was signed for the expansion of refugee operations to new site in Kalobeyei. In 2017, I conducted interviews with various stakeholders from the “host community” to ask their opinions, expectations and concerns about the new settlement. Opinions varied widely, from those who hoped to benefit from new business opportunities and better social services, to those who felt they had been left out of negotiations for the project and excluded from its benefits. The most strikingly negative comments came from Apa Nakware, a prominent diviner and leader of pastoralists among the Ng’ilukumong territorial section:

Foreigners [referring to refugees],
Those that you drove here,¹
There in Narongor, up to Kakuma, up to Lokicogio,
That brought a bad year!
Even graves, they are there!
...
You have come to talk to us, but we are finished.
The livestock are finished
Is there a cow here?
Or a goat?
...
Let us speak of clear issues.
When a Dinka dies.
They are buried here.
That is a calamity.
Is this not where the Turkana should be buried?
Why are the foreigners buried here?
Whoever is brought here is buried.
That is a calamity.

What should one make of this claim, that livelihood failures can be attributed to the interment of foreigners in Turkana soil? Or more precisely, how should agencies, consultants, and other knowledge brokers in the field of development deal with this allusion to occult forces by a local stakeholder? Should the reference to graves be taken as a metaphor, an idiomatic expression of concern that the refugees in Kakuma have stayed too long? Or should we take this more literally, as a traditional leader’s warning about the consequences of contaminating Turkana soil? And if the latter, how do we distinguish an instrumental attempt to drum up xenophobia from a genuine concern about threats from occult forces?

As with other cases where autochthony is invoked, it can be difficult or even impossible to distinguish authentic from instrumentalised manifestations of culture and identity (Geschiere 2009). However, as I will argue ahead, international actors do make distinctions between superstitious beliefs and respected cosmologies. When they engage communities affected by their interventions, this distinction affects – perhaps implicitly – which stakeholders are heard and which are dismissed. As this case study from Turkana suggests, the risk is not only that certain people feel excluded, but that their knowledge is disregarded on the basis of conforming to neither the dominant ontology of western rationalism or the romanticised image of an indigenous worldview.

Kalobeyei

Turkana County has played host to the Kakuma refugee camp since 1992, following the regime change in Ethiopia. The fall of the SPLA-friendly DERG forced the southern Sudanese rebels who

¹ In his comments, he used the 2nd person to refer to me, the UN, and Europeans broadly.

were operating in Ethiopia to leave, along with approximately 150,000 Sudanese refugees. As asylum seekers arrived in northern Kenya, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) set up operations in Turkana, initially hosting refugees in Lokicogio but soon shifting them to Kakuma. To the early arrivals from southern Sudan were added refugees from Somalia and the Great Lakes Countries. The small missionary town of Kakuma had previously hosted famine camps for impoverished Turkana herders, but the arrival of the UNHCR brought humanitarian operations of an unprecedented scale.

Turkana people accustomed to a nearly homogeneous ethnoscape – with the exception of a few European missionaries and Kenyan traders – suddenly found themselves living among a diverse population, many speaking incomprehensible languages. The early years of co-residence were difficult for refugees and Turkana alike. The former found themselves targeted by impoverished but well-armed locals. Turkana found themselves without access to former wet season grazing areas, and the growing camp population caused rapid deforestation as refugees sought cooking fuel anywhere that they could procure it. But even in these early years, there were also signs of more cosmopolitan relations, as people came together in business, schooling, and even marriage (Ohta 2005). In Naabek, a Turkana neighbourhood just on the edge of the camp, a generation of Turkana children has grown up speaking Somali or Amharic as their second language, some living as wards in the households of more financially capable refugee families.

A more consistent negativity was expressed toward the UNHCR and the Government of Kenya (GoK) for providing services to refugees but not Turkana citizens. Colonisation by Britain had brought suppression and rule by a foreign minority, and Kenya's Independence seemed to replace oppression by European rulers with marginalisation by distant African rulers. But the refugee camp put the very idea of an ethnic homeland in question, and many Turkana locals were angered to see refugees receiving food and social services from which they were excluded, despite living in similar or even worse conditions (Aukot 2003).

In 2014, the UNHCR responded to these concerns with a new proposition: an integrated settlement focused on both long-term solutions for refugees and new development opportunities for the host community. Cash-based assistance for refugees would allow them to use aid funding in a manner that they preferred, while also supporting the growth of local supply chains and businesses where the cash would be spent. By up-ending the conventional top-down approach to aid, the Kalobeyei Settlement was intended to offer a win-win for refugees, agencies, and hosts. However, it would require a new site. Negotiations with host community representatives concluded in February 2015, and the UNHCR was given permission to begin construction in area called Natukobenyo.

The plan was accompanied by a study by the World Bank, which painted an optimistic picture of integration and garnered enthusiasm among donors for the new settlement approach. The resulting report presents a nuanced picture of the social and economic impacts of the refugee camp on the Turkana host community. The optimism emerging from the report is not a result of its content but rather of its structure. While there is acknowledgement of both the pros and the cons of hosting refugees, as well as the winners and losers of economic integration, the introductory and concluding sections provide selective summaries that emphasise the more positive message. This framing became even more pronounced in the dissemination of the report's results over social media and at public events; the lead author's presentation at a Kakuma-based Tedx event was titled "Refugees are Good for the Local Economy" and was broadcast widely on social media.²

Pro-Integration Narratives

The World Bank report discussed above included a survey of host opinions about the refugee camp. Findings showed that people living closer to Kakuma are more likely to report positive perceptions of refugees. However, the report did not stop with a poll of local perspectives; it went on to qualify the findings with the observation that "negative narratives are remarkably unnuanced and nonspecific

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=65&v=nsCCaxWebG0

among the non-Kakuma Turkana” (Sanghi et al. 2016):36). Positive perceptions were attributed to personal interactions and attributed a higher degree of validity, while negative comments were disqualified as baseless regurgitation of meta-narratives about ‘violent others’ government neglect. In a television interview about the report, the UNHCR Country Director of UNHCR explained why this was one of the most interesting findings:

That is the result of detailed research. It shows us that the less you know about something, the more you fear it, the more you have preconceived ideas... People who know refugees, who work with refugees, who interact with refugees, will tell you that these are people who, because of circumstances in their countries had to cross the border, but these are people who are very inventive, business minded, and can actually be very positive for the people who accept to welcome them. But you often have these people further away, who do not know refugees, but who have very strong preconceived ideas. (Africa Leadership Dialogue 2017)

This explanation attributes the negative perceptions among people living farther from the camp to baseless xenophobia and hearsay. This interpretation is also reflected in the associated social impact report, which notes that none of the informants in the impact assessment had ‘first-hand experience’ with refugee violence. Accounts such as the following were evoked to suggest that xenophobic sentiments were based on superstition and speculation:

One of the reports came from a woman in Lorengo who said that her neighbour’s family all fell ill after eating food purchased in the refugee camp. She attributes the illness to deliberate poisoning, though no evidence was produced. (Vemuru et al. 2016):45).

The disqualification of this account above reflects an unexamined bias in the analytical framework of the researchers. Having conducted interviews with herders in the grazelands around Oropoi and Nawountos – to the west of Kakuma and along the border with Uganda – I recorded accounts that involve situations and entities toward which the World Bank analysts would express a similar scepticism. However, as I will argue in the next section, such comments must be examined in context and with attention to the etiological uncertainties and existential concerns to which they speak. Failing to do so disqualifies the ontological mode through which many rural leaders in Turkana express community concerns, and thereby excludes them from the rationalist discourse in which the World Bank and UNHCR have promoted their integration agenda in Kakuma.

Allusions to the Occult

The discussion described here took place in September 2017 in Nawountos, a small centre at the border of Kenya’s Turkana County and Uganda’s Kaabong Constituency. At the meeting were myself, my field assistant Eyanae, and between 25 and 30 men and women who reside in or near Nawountos. Rather than a roundtable, in which people engage together in a discussion, the forum was conducted through extended speeches by individuals, including Apa Nakware, a local shopkeeper, and 5 other men. Women were present but did not take the floor. Our conversation lasted about two hours.

I began the meeting with comments largely unrelated to refugees or the new settlement. I was interested at the start with the attendees’ relationship to Kalobeyei, the area where the new settlement had been constructed. Did they call this place home, and if so, did they still maintain a connection with the place now that they were living 50km away? Did they return regularly? The first speaker described the last time they had grazed cattle in that area, in 1997:

Since then, that thing started encroaching. It encroached forward and finished the grass. Since the cattle grazed at that time, they never grazed there another year... Grass for cows never grow there any more, even though it rains. Only the grass for the goats is sprouting.

While people continue to herd browsing animals such as goats and camels in Natukobenyo, the cattle have not been able to graze in that area for over 20 years. This ecological change – the loss of grasses

for cattle – was later discussed among informants in Natukobenyo, but without any conclusive attribution of causation. The reference to “that thing” raises an air of mystery about the environmental changes that suddenly beset Natukobenyo and its surrounds. But it also sustains the uncertainty over the cause of the change, keeping the question open to etiological scrutiny.

After this explanation of environmental changes in Natukobenyo, Apa Nakware followed with his concerns about the curses that might be wrought by the refugee graves. After he had concluded, subsequent speakers reiterated his point, tying these concerns about ‘curses’ to problems such as deforestation, refugee arms smuggling, and the neglect of Turkana pastoralists by their own government. One of the men in Nawountos explained:

Our trees are finished. And it is these trees that we depend on. These tribes come and clear all these trees. We are asking what is the importance of bringing them. Have enough not yet been brought?

Deforestation has been a problem since the arrival of refugees in Kakuma. People need cooking fuel, and the easiest way to acquire it is to gather dry firewood from the periphery of the camp. However, Turkana people also depend upon these trees, which have a slow replacement rate in the arid environment.

Environmental degradation has been a recurring cause of conflict, but the threat of violence is exacerbated by the easy access to firearms. Another man explained the concern that refugees were amassing arms with which they could attack Turkana:

These aliens, whenever they come from South Sudan, they come through the nose of the Mogila Mountains carrying weapons. This is another big issue. There is no security from Kenya or anyone else. There are a lot of weapons with these people. They move in groups of ten, twenty. Whoever is bringing these people here does not see this problem.

As with the woman’s accusation of poisoning in the World Bank report, the security threat was described without reference to any concrete evidence or a specific example. However, just over a year later, a refugee student expelled from a mixed school in Lokicogio returned with an AK-47 and executed six Turkana students. The violence was likely an indication of bullying within the school, rather than broader community tensions, but the ease with which the student procured the weapon indicated the presence of smuggled arms in the camp.³

Many of these points came back to the comments by Apa Nakware, bringing concerns about security, ecology, and marginalisation together with the warning about mixed graves. Another speaker elaborated:

Even if people fight in Congo, they are brought to Turkana. And it is just Turkana, not these other parts of Kenya. They are not in Kikuyu land, or wherever else. Why bring every problem to Turkana? These problems come to affect our people. Because, this land is hot. Because, these people bring their curses here. Their problems, they bring them into this land. There should be something good for the Turkana people, to whom the soil belongs, who are the owners of the land. They should receive something that is enough. But there is nothing that has been done. This government that brought the refugees here; it speaks with the refugees only.

Romantic Worldviews and Pragmatic Ontologies

While secular rationalism maintains its primacy in the hierarchy of knowledge production within the field of development, indigenous world views have enjoyed greater recognition and respect over the past decade. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People recognises the diversity of

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kenya-attacks/expelled-refugee-student-kills-seven-in-kenyan-school-idUSKBN1CJOEV>

“spiritual and religious traditions”, and Article 25 provides “the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands.” The International Association for Impact Assessments encourages attention to the ways that interventions affect not only the physical environment, but also a community’s way of life and tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The World Bank’s Environmental and Social Standards provide protections for sites of ‘spiritual value’ to a community, and there are mechanisms for communities to seek compensation when such sites are been affected or destroyed.

However, these protections have largely benefited people holding world views with which development actors can sympathise. Religious and spiritual systems that have been the subject of academic writing are more likely to gain traction, including the animistic ontologies of Amazonia, North America, and Australia. There is an aspect of romanticisation at play here, and religious or spiritual systems are valued if they seem to put people into a close relationship with nature and ecology, or if they espouse notions of harmony and asceticism that resonate with peace-making and sustainability agendas. However, when it comes to pastoralists, most of the protections put in place for them focus on the sustainability and resilience of their livelihoods. There has been very little engagement beyond anthropology – and even within the discipline – with the spiritual and cosmological dimensions of African pastoralist life, compared to other indigenous peoples.

Part of the reason for this is that pastoralists have often been described as a practical people with little interest in the invisible worlds of mystics or the elaborate ontologies of animists. Ioan Lewis described Somali pastoralists as “highly pragmatic in their assumptions”, such that “magic, witchcraft, and sorcery play minor roles in the society of the northern pastoralists and to a large extent appear to be of Arabian origin rather than traditional Somali practice” (Lewis 1961):26). drastically different setting, Ole Bruun writes of Mongolian herders that most aspects of everyday life “escape religious influence”, which he takes as evidence that “Buddhism far from eradicated the common pragmatic attitude to life” (Bruun 2006): 95). The same has been written of people in the Ateker-speaking groups. Novelli describe Karimojong as a people with a "pragmatic mentality" about religious matters (Novelli 1999). And in his *Preliminary Survey of the Turkana*, Gulliver writes:

Turkana magico-religious activities and beliefs are both relatively meagre, and generally vague. In all things, at all times, the Turkana, man or woman, is essentially practically-minded, unimaginative, non-speculative” (1951:229).⁴

However, in his thesis on the cosmological foundations of Turkana sacrifice, Anthony Barrett (1998:76-9) argues that witchcraft, divination and religion play a critical role through their “quotidian manifestations” in the handling of daily problems (Barrett 1998:79). Witchcraft accusations are not merely an attribution of cause to sinister forces, but an attempt to diagnosis social ills in the family or community. Protective amulets and spells help people to deal with their fear in potentially dangerous situations. Seen in this light, occult entities in Turkana do play a practical role in everyday life, especially in situations of uncertainty and precarity. They represent an ontology well adapted to livelihoods carried out in contexts of environmental unpredictability.

But curses, spirits, and even witchcraft in Turkana ontology do not come together in an all-encompassing world view or cosmology. An attempt to elicit an entire Turkana cosmology is doomed to fail; Turkana prophets recognise that there is as much uncertainty in the spiritual world as there is in the weather. The ontological framework through which pastoralist leaders like Apa Nakware introduce and question their source is an attempt to emphasise that uncertainty, to raise unanswered questions about the links between environmental and political concerns, and to call into question the dominant narratives set by the UNHCR, its partners, and the government.

⁴ Over the course of 20 pages, Gulliver provides an outline of ‘supernatural beliefs’ observed during his time in Turkana. But he emphasises that they are rarely brought up in daily life.

International agencies nowadays often recognise the world views and cosmologies of indigenous people as a matter of human rights. The problem, then, is not that the World Bank and UNHCR ascribe to a different ontology than Turkana, and so exclude occult forces like curses from land negotiations. The problem is that they have developed an unexamined bias about which ontologies merit respect and which can be dismissed.

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