Chapter 15

Traditional African Culture and Communication: The Missing Link in Cattle Rustling Interventions among Pastoralist Communities in Northern Kenya

Agnes Lucy Lando
Daystar University, Kenya

Samuel Kochomay
Mount Kenya University, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Cattle rustling among Kenyan and non-Kenyan pastoralists remains the oldest, persistent, and most complex conflict. It is a violent, intermittent and often unpredictable warfare where communities raid each other for livestock. These raids cause human and material loss, displacement of families, fleeing teachers, school closures and student dropouts. Attempts to solve this problem either exacerbate the conflict or just produce short-term peace. The perpetual failure of successive governments and other actors to bring about conflict resolution for cattle rustling point to a missing link. This chapter explores the embeddedness of cattle rustling in the deep roots of pastoralists’ traditional culture and communication. The chapter examines selected cattle rustling interventions in northern Kenya in the last three decades. This analysis has been synthesized with ethnographic research findings and Social Penetration Theory to explain the persistence of cattle rustling. Finally, the chapter proposes a culturally appropriate model to address cattle rustling.

INTRODUCTION

Cattle rustling custom among the Northern Kenya pastoralists as well as with pastoralists in other parts of Kenya and the neighboring countries of Ethiopia, Sudan and Uganda remains the oldest, persistent, and the most complex conflict in which all attempts by the state and non-state actors have yielded less than satisfactory outcomes. These pastoralists have been involved in persistent inter-tribal and cross-border
cattle rustling for over a century. Cattle-rustling conflict is a violent, intermittent and often unpredictable warfare where communities raid each other for livestock. It takes intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic forms and even transcends international borders. The term cattle rustling, livestock raiding, pastoral conflict and cattle raids are used interchangeably in this study.

Both the history of cattle rustling and the attendant interventions are centuries’ old phenomenon. In the written history, explorers who came to the region found these communities already engaging in cattle rustling, with the first recorded incidences in the 1850s (Barber, 1968). This conflict has over the years undergone a metamorphosis of weaponry, motives, and tactics. Prior studies on cattle rustling and cattle rustling interventions covered themes such as the role of small arms and light weapons in cattle rustling (Mkutu, 2003; Stites & Akwabai, 2009), the role of women in cattle rustling conflict (Cathy, 2003) and cattle rustling interventions (Adan and Pkalya 2005; Bevan, 2008) among others.

Cattle raiding has persisted in Northern Kenya and across its international borders even after independence. The last three decades have seen pastoral conflicts’ upsurge in frequency and intensity in northern Kenya and the neighboring nations. These raids cause human and material loss, displacement of families, fleeing teachers, school closures and student dropouts. Attempts to solve this problem either exacerbate the conflict or just produce short-term effects. Despite many interventions aimed at resolving cattle-rustling conflicts such as State repressive military operations, voluntary disarmament, livestock branding, livestock census, legislations and depastoralization policies, the practice continues and very little success, if any, has been achieved. All these initiatives have been ineffective in resolving cattle rustling. This constant failure requires rethinking of interventions with potentially more effective and long-lasting impact. The perpetual failure of successive governments and other actors to innovate more appropriate and effective conflict resolution and management strategies for cattle rustling conflicts point to a missing link, and demands rethinking of cattle rustling interventions.

This chapter explores the embeddedness and deep-rootedness of cattle rustling practice in the pastoralists’ traditional culture and communication. It also observes that the past cattle rustling interventions have largely focused on the superficial and symptomatic spheres of the conflict, treating cattle as the cause of raids without considering deeper psycho-religious motivations to cattle raids on whose foundation is traditional culture and communication mechanisms – the missing link in the cattle rustling interventions. To locate the missing link in cattle rustling interventions, the chapter examines selected cattle rustling interventions in northern Kenya in the last three decades. This analysis has been synthesized with ethnographic research findings and use of Social Penetration Theory as an evaluative framework to explain the persistence of cattle rustling and perpetual failure of the interventions by various groups. Drawing from the explanatory framework, and the analysis of the interventions, this chapter proposes a more culturally appropriate model for integrating, improving and/or combining past interventions so as to effectively address cattle rustling conflict and similar conflicts that are rooted in ethnic traditions and communication.

CATTLE RUSTLING AND ETHNIC CONFLICT - PASTORALISM, PASTORALISTS AND CATTLE RUSTLING NEXUS

Pastoralists in Northern Kenya have been at war with each other for centuries. The Northern Kenya pastoralists who include Turkana, Pokot, Samburu, Borana and Somali raid and get raided by their neighboring pastoralists within and across international borders making cattle rustling across border conflict phenomenon.