



Born Cattle Bandits? Not Us

By Yobo Rutin



On the 9th of April 2013, three members of parliament from West Pokot held a media press conference in Nairobi during which they vehemently protested the characterization of the Pokot people of northern Kenya as [“criminals and thieves”](#). They were reacting to a statement attributed to President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, who was giving a speech on behalf of other invited heads of states during the inauguration of President Uhuru Kenyatta and his Deputy William Ruto.

President Museveni, perhaps in jest, had said, “These people have been stealing my cattle. I have agreed with these [Pokot] MPs. . . . I urge Uhuru, this people from West Pokot should stop stealing my cows.”

In their rebuttal, the three MPs claimed that they had been compelled to respond to the neighbouring president’s “wholesome condemnation” of the Pokot since, as they averred, it had become his practice to make such spurious statements about the Pokot people. The MPs claimed that following President Museveni’s statement, they had faced taunting and disparaging remarks from fellow Kenyan MPs who called them “the president’s thieves”, amongst other unsavoury epithets. They, therefore, wanted to change the perception and stereotyped portrayal of the Pokot as cattle bandits.

The MPs arguments were based on a phenomenon that social psychologist Claude Steele calls the “stereotype threat”, the fear of what effects such stereotypes may have on an individual or targeted

group. In this case, the impact it may have on the innocent Pokot who does not practice cattle rustling and banditry as well on inter-communal relations between the Pokot and other communities. “In as much as these remarks could pass off as soft, friendly and populist, we are not averse to the grave repercussions that remarks could have in [mopping \[sic\] ethnic passions and cross-border tensions](#) particularly among pastoralist communities in the said regions,” said Pkosing, who is the MP for Pokot South.

The MPs highlighted the risks associated with persistent stereotyping and misguided narratives about “others” and raised the challenge of what needs to be done to maintain social cohesion in Kenya.

But there were those who disagreed with the pronouncements of the Pokot leaders. “While we abhor the general characterization of a whole community as cattle rustlers, it does not help either to deny the shame and embarrassment the few errant elements have caused our people and neighbours,” said the then Baringo County Speaker William Kamket.

Stereotyping is pervasive, persistent, but...

Kenya is a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multicultural country where any individual or ethnic community may be subjected to stereotyping and coded language by others. There are, however, concerns that the open and persistent stereotyping of particular communities — bordering on hate speech — could be counterproductive in many respects.

Stereotyping “other” communities could lead to prejudice, discrimination, and open hostility amongst groups. This, therefore, begs the question of whether it would not be prudent to educate social groups on the need to avoid using wounding words that could ignite prejudice, discrimination, tension, and conflict. Indeed, the National Integration and Cohesion Commission (NICC) gives ethnic stereotyping as grounds for prosecution.

Stereotyping is an instance of what the psychologist Jerome Bruner calls “going beyond the information given”, the capacity for equivalence grouping — assigning objects to categories and making inferences about their specific attributes based on what we think we know about the class in general. It is part of the cognitive machinery that allows us to deal with novelty in everyday life. As Bruner puts it, “If we were to respond to each event as unique and to learn anew what to do about it or even what to call it, we would soon be swamped by the complexity of our environment. This is the reason why stereotyping is a common human feature.

Just because stereotyping is cognitively inescapable, however, does not mean that stereotypes are generally accurate. We also have cognitive mechanisms in place that make stereotypes resistant to change in the face of conflicting evidence. Despite evidence to the contrary about the targeted social groups, the in-group tends to always hold onto the adopted stereotypes. This is especially the case when stereotypes are laden with emotional content and thus form the basis for prejudice.

Concerning prejudice and discrimination, it may not be uncommon for stereotypes and misleading narratives to influence official attitudes, policy, institutional and administrative orientations towards certain ethnic/social groups or regions, resulting in unfavourable social, economic, political, and administrative outcomes. This is irrespective of how remotely realistic such assessments may be. Officers, in any case, are part of society, dominant or otherwise.

Stereotypes and narratives on pastoralists and arid lands

Pastoralists have long borne a barrage of unfavourable and misleading stereotypes and narratives that have impacted their well-being. These are either based on their livelihoods, their environment,

or their cultural practices. Importantly, these stereotypes and narratives have led to, or become, a reflection of these communities' marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination.

There are several ways in which pastoralists and other social groups are socially constructed and (re)presented in daily discourse. These forms vary from well-publicized political speeches, policy statements and approaches, to media coverage, and commentaries expressing concern about conflicts and insecurity in pastoralists' areas. Kenyans are therefore well exposed to the different ways in which pastoralists and other minorities are constructed as essential categories.

In his report titled [*The Unrelenting Persistence of Certain Narratives*](#), Michael Ochieng catalogues the narratives and stereotypes about Kenya's arid and semi-arid regions where pastoralists reside, and their adverse effects on social policy change. He identifies the national actors responsible for defining policy narratives on development and climate change adaptation in Kenya, their perceptions about ASALs (Arid and Semi-Arid Lands) and the premises that underpin these perceptions and narratives.

Ochieng observes that powerful narratives about the ASALs are a legacy of the Sessional Paper Number 10 of 1965 that laid the basis for subsequent policy and marginalization of arid lands. These include the security/insecurity/conflict narrative perpetrated by the [*state of emergency*](#) that revolved around security (specifically, insecurity). He notes, "The area and the people came to be viewed largely in terms of security, and interactions between them and organs of the state were defined in the same terms. Most government resources spent in these areas went to security, law and order, albeit with little respect for the rule of law."

Hardly any investments were made in social service delivery or economic development between independence in 1963 and the reintroduction of multi-party politics in 1992. As a result, the ASALs, particularly those in northern Kenya, missed out almost entirely on the development opportunities of the first three decades of independence. The narrative that mobile pastoralism was irrational, unproductive, and environmentally destructive was essentially an all-embracing narrative with economic, socio-cultural and environmental overtones. "It had devastating effects on the way both policymakers and the rest of the society viewed pastoralists - largely as backward and resistant to change, refusing to modernize and take advantage of the benefits of civilization and development. Anthropological explanations such as 'cattle complex' were used to validate such characterization."

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The little policy attention extended to the ASALs in the late 1970s led to the creation of the Ministry of Reclamation of Arid and Semi-Arid Areas and Wastelands, a perfect condemnation of the ASAL areas based on their perceived non-productivity. This, notwithstanding that the country continued to rely on these regions for the steady supply of livestock and livestock products and to benefit from its rich biodiversity in support of a thriving tourism economy. Ochieng links this narrative to the proclamation of Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 that the ASALs could only benefit from the economy as recipients of "grants of subsidized loans" from the more economically productive parts of the country.

Purveyors of stereotypes, hostilities

Whether held by the majority/dominant or minority/non-dominant groups, stereotypes explain things easily. They take less effort and give the appearance of order without the difficult work that understanding the entire hierarchy of things demands. They reinforce the belief and disbelief of its

users and furnish the basis for the development and maintenance of solidarity for the [prejudiced](#).

Minority groups do not escape the tendency toward stereotype, partly because of the set of economic, political, cultural, and personal reasons they find themselves in. The hostility of the minority/target group is expressed partly towards other minority groups and in part towards the dominant groups (pastoralists amongst themselves and pastoralists jointly against farmer/agricultural groups). And when minorities become dominant groups, they sometimes discriminate [against their own](#) (non-dominant clans). Claude Steele, for instance, has pointed out that stigmatized populations may adopt [counter-stereotypical behaviours](#) to dissociate themselves from stereotypes. Thus, prejudice and discrimination affect not only the attitudes and behaviour of minority group members towards the standards set by the dominant society but also their responsibility to themselves and their groups. Self-regarding attitudes are as much part of one's social experience as attitudes toward other persons and social norms.

When minorities become dominant groups, they sometimes turn to discriminate against their own.

An assessment of descriptive content of cultural stereotypes not only indicates their consensual [sharing](#) but also that the content influences accepted norms for inter-group relations that finally [justify discrimination](#).

Content of Kenyan ethnic group stereotypes

In their study, [An Examination of Ethnic Stereotypes and Coded Language Use in Kenya and its Implication for National Cohesion](#), Joseph Naituli and Sellah King'oro have provided stereotypes of nearly every community in Kenya based on region. The graphic below presents the common stereotypes used in Baringo and Elgeyo Marakwet counties.

Common Stereotype	Targeted Community	Translation	Meaning
Ng'oroko	Pokot	Cattle rustlers	People who steal livestock
Punyoot	Any community	Enemy	Any community not meant to share resources with -Elgeyo and Marakwet views
Chepng'al	Nandi	Person of many words	Very proud and talkative
Ng'etiik	Luo	Boys	The uncircumcised
Cheptukenyot	Tugen	Tugen lady	The very mean lady
Kimurkelda	Kikuyu	Brown teeth	Community of people with brown teeth
Chepturkanyat	Turkana	Turkana lady	The dirty lady who never observes hygiene

Source: [Naituli and King'oro \(2018\)](#)

Just what is it with the Pokot and others?

The Pokot (Pochoon singular, Pokot plural) of north-western Kenya and the Amudat District of north-eastern Uganda have been at the centre of national and regional discussions, narratives and stereotypes around cattle raiding, conflict and insecurity. Often portrayed as the exemplars of cattle

rustling and banditry in the north-western corner of Kenya, many Pokot strongly protest what they perceive as the tendency to criminalize the entire community because of the practice of a few. In the narratives and stereotypes, they are usually accompanied by a supporting cast of their neighbours — the Keiyo, Marakwet, and Turkana, not forgetting fellow travellers from across the Ugandan border — the Karamojong, amongst others.

Some members of the Pokot community and their allies argue that most individuals in the community are against the practice of cattle raiding. Yet, the Pokot community is persistently cast in blanket, villainous terms. Little consideration is given to context and the historical realities in which the Pokot, and indeed the other communities in their localities, have found themselves. It should be noted that the Pokot also have stereotypes of their own that target other [communities](#).

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While the “transformative” school of thought in conflict studies holds that cattle rustling — an activity that has been practised for hundreds of years — might have radically changed and acquired a horrendously sophisticated character in manifold ways, it is imperative, the Pokot argue, to interrogate the deep and tangled roots of the persistence of the practice and find urgent, pragmatic, and long-term measures to eradicate it rather than condemning a whole community.

A quick sampling — from different timelines and sources — of the various favourable or unfavourable narratives, stereotypes and analytical proclamations targeting the Pokot, that could well refer to other communities too, might be illustrative:

“The region’s most formidable and battle-hardened ethnic war machine” — Paul Goldsmith, *The Cost of Cattle Rustling in Northern Kenya, 1994*.

“The Pokot have hostile relations with almost all of [their neighbours](#).”

“Vulnerability to frequent harassment from their neighbours has made the Pokot a [tough and ruthless](#) people.”

“The heaviest losses of the Kenya military since independence has been sustained during the ill-fated suppression of the [Pokot](#).”

“Due to their small territory the Pokot have remained the most ethnically cohesive society, and often their conflict for grazing area is about community [survival](#).”

“It is therefore important to educate the Pokot and other communities on issues related to stereotypes and coded language because it is evident that it can cause violent reactions between one community and [another](#).”

“Cattle are symbols of wealth, blessings, and the male identity. Raiding has been common place, as warriors are expected to replenish declining herds or to take vengeance on those who have [raided them](#).”

“You have reached the Heart of Africa. You are now entering Karamoja Closed District. No visitor may enter without an outlying districts permit” — Colonial signposts marking Karamoja [region](#).

“Pokot raids do not aim at expanding [their territory](#).”

“Conflict is concentrated in the village of Loruk, where Pokot and Tugen live. Three districts meet at this ribbon-built village, and the boundary lines are unclear, which causes tension because both groups suspect each other of encroaching on their own land. Furthermore, the Pokot claim their right to a primary school that was allegedly built for them in 1984 but later was assigned to Baringo Central where Tugen are [the majority](#).”

“There is the facile, shorthand cultural explanation that conveniently fits preconceptions of timeless ‘tribal’ warfare. This ‘cultural’ explanation is facile not because it is untrue, but because it is only one of several entangled causes that range from the colonial and independent Kenyan governments’ culpability in resource depletion through [underdevelopment](#) and reduction of land holdings.”

“The overriding factor that makes pastoral communities prone to conflict (whether violent or otherwise) is their [ambiguous relationship](#) with the state and the majority of sedentary populations that reside within them.”

“Recent [new factors](#) fuel ongoing conflicts along the Pokot-Turkana border. Successful oil-prospecting missions and a proposed geothermal power plant increase the desirability of land areas claimed by both sides. The Pokot are not the [main aggressors](#).”

“No common policy on intervention by the states is available. Attempts at interventions have been poorly coordinated and executed, too often taking a narrow definition of security that has focused on coercive [disarmament](#) without focusing sufficiently on providing viable economic alternatives to those whose livelihoods have become dependent on gun. Finally, traditional structures of authority within communities have been gravely weakened, as have some of the cultural restraints upon violence that operated in the past.”

“Currently, the Pokot in Uganda are allied to the Pokot in Kenya and jointly carry out raids on the Karamojong and the Karamojong from Uganda also have alliances with the Turkana of Kenya and carry out raids in Pokot North (Kenya).” — David Alier

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