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MAMBO!

Recent research findings in Eastern Africa

Conflicts over water around Lake Turkana

Armed violence between Turkana and Dassanetch

Marine LE STER

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The north-western region of Kenya is ignored politically and economically by the rest of the country. Characterized by droughts, starvations, ethnic conflicts and cattle raids, this territory is seen by the Kenyan government as a marginalized area, a space in "crisis" where violence has finally become commonplace. Almost every week, the national media reports increasingly frequent and intense conflicts: the Turkana pastoralists in Kenya are regularly attacked by the Dassanetch, Ethiopian pastoralists, in raids around the water points of the region. The environmental, socio-economic and historical context is crucial in the understanding of the emergence of such conflicts (I). Moreover, these conflicts are systematically described as ethnic conflicts for the control of water points, a view which simplifies reality (II).

1. Understanding the context

In an inhospitable environment (1.1) where pastoral activities are threatened (1.2), the history of the peoples of the region provides some keys to understand the conflict (1.3).

1.1 The environmental context

Lake Turkana, an area of 6750 km², is situated in the Rift Valley of East Africa, in the far north of Kenya. The border between Kenya and Ethiopia overlaps its northern extremity. The alkaline salt lake of volcanic origin collects the waters from a large watershed (209,157 km²), in a hot and arid environment, described as "an inhospitable environment where drought and famine recur at regular intervals" (McCabe and Ellis, 1987) and where food aid is permanent¹. The lake

receives the vast majority of its water from the Ethiopian river Omo, which accounts for more than 90% of its supply. The only outlet of the system is the evaporation, since the lake is endorheic (closed basin). The role of rainfall is crucial in this arid context. The average rainfall around the lake is less than 200 mm/year. However, the inequality of the spatial distribution of rainfall across the lake watershed is extreme: 2000 mm/year in the Ethiopian highlands ("water towers" of the lake), less than 100 mm/year in northern Kenya². The region is characterized by erratic rainfall which is variable in time and space. Droughts are not a recent phenomenon, and people have been able to adapt the situation. However, formerly expected every 6/7 years, they now affect the region every 2/3 years. By the end of the 21st century, estimations predict that there will be twice as

1 Oba (Gufu), Ecological factors in land use conflicts, land administration and food security in Turkana, Kenya, dans Overseas Development Institute, Pastoral Development Network, 1992, 23 pages.

2 UNEP, Africa Water Atlas, 2010, 326 pages.

many droughts, and that they will last longer³. Nowadays in balance the system remains fragile: small changes in the hydraulic regime (decrease in the flow of the Omo, for instance) is likely to reverse the water balance. The situation is already worrying: the lake level has dropped drastically for several generations. Increasing temperatures, declining and erratic rainfall, and especially sedimentation accelerated by the presence of damson the Omo River are the main causes.

1. 2 *The socio-economic context*

Nine million people live on the basin of Lake Turkana, of which only 1.7 million on the Kenyan side. The population density is 4 inhabitants per Sqkm. The population is concentrated in the north (in Ethiopia) and the south ends (Kenya) of the lake basin. With a million people, the Turkana are the major community inhabiting the west and south of the lake. The Dassanetch (or Merille), nearly 50 000 inhabitants, is an ethnic group inhabiting the delta of the Omo River in Ethiopia. Other communities are present around the lake: the Gabbra (east), the Rendille and the Samburu (south-east). The Turkana are regularly in conflict with the Toposa (Sudan), the Karamojong (Uganda), the Donyiro (Ethiopia), the Dassanetch (Ethiopia), and the Pokot (Kenya)⁴.

According to the District Livestock Officer in Lodwar, 60% of the inhabitants of the district of Turkana are pastoralists, 20% agro-pastoralists - this figure being in the increase because of loss of animals during the last droughts - 12% work

in trading centers and 8% are fishermen. The dominant activity is nomadic herding, respectively of goats, sheep, cattle, donkeys and camels. More than a vital livelihood, livestock keeping also carries a symbolic value. This activity is still seen, especially by the government, as unproductive and destructive for the environment.



Photo: Marine Le Ster

1. 3 *The role of history*

The pastoral peripheries of northern Kenya have long been neglected, as this region has never really been integrated economically and socially to the rest of the country. Attempts to develop this area have rarely considered the needs and interests of the communities of the region. Thus, access to water for the nomadic population has been severely reduced in recent years not only because of reduced rainfall but also and especially because of changes in practices of land use and large-scale agricultural development schemes through irrigation⁵.

Three periods can be identified in the

⁵ Flintan (Fiona) & Tamrat (Imeru), Spilling Blood over Water? The case of Ethiopia, in Scarcity and Surfeit, Ed. Jeremy Lind and Kathryn Sturman, 2002, 388 pages, pp. 242-319.

history of the Turkana ethnic group. Firstly, the pre-colonial period, before the end of the 19th century, corresponds to the apogee of the group. With their herds unaffected by rinderpest, the Turkana have been able to conquer the lake. The circulation of firearms began during this period, fueled by the slave and ivory trade. The arrival of British settlers marked the decline of the Turkana who came to threaten the sovereignty of the colonial administration. The British colonial administration disarmed the Turkana, while other ethnic groups were not affected by this policy of demilitarization. This differential treatment resulted in security imbalance in the region, and the Turkana found themselves defenseless. Finally, north-western Kenya, being devoid of natural resources with economic interest, has been ignored by the Kenyan authorities after independence (1963) and its nomadic people kept out of the dynamics of national development.

As one can see, the present conflicting situation has its origin in the proliferation of weapons in a pastoral region neglected by the state and characterized by an inhospitable natural environment.

2. **Water wars, ethnic wars: reality or simplification?**

2.1 *Water is not the driver of conflicts*

This study determines the relative role of water (1.1) and ethnicity (2.2) in conflicts around Lake Turkana, and attempts to show the lack of involvement of the Kenyan government in their management (2.3).

Conflicts reported around Lake Turkana, mainly concentrated in the Omo river delta in the north of the lake, are due to three main causes: different communities of fishermen

³ Omolo (Nancy A.), Gender and climate change-induced conflict in pastoral communities: Case study of Turkana in north-western Kenya, Ed. par African Center for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD, Durban), 2010, 22 pages.

⁴ Omolo (Nancy A.), 2010.

using resources of the lake want to control them; Dassanetch claim they have a right of access to the lake, which, in their views, belongs to them as much as the Turkana; and finally, pastures are fertile in this region due to the subtle blend between the salt water of the lake and the fresh water of the Omo. Therefore, scarce land has become the object of a competition in which the property rights of local communities are used as tools for struggle. Thus, contrary to what is reported in expert reports, conflicts between the Turkana and Dassanetch pastoralists and fishermen are caused by the scarcity of resources offered (grazing land), sheltered (fish and fishing equipment) and attracted (livestock) by water. When they meet around a water point, the Turkana and Dassanetch clash violently in order to gain control of it. However the same water point is not permanently controlled: as soon as animals have finished drinking, the dominant group and temporary "owner" of the site leaves, letting it free. Motives for attacking the shepherds are material, symbolic and social: accumulating livestock resource for their subsistence and for trade and sale, which consolidates the prestige of the communities and individuals, creates social capital and strengthens social relations⁶.

2.2 Ethnicity does not explain everything

In these battles for the control of resources, the Turkana fight against the Dassanetch: we are therefore in presence of a conflict between two ethnic groups. In such conflicts, the criterion of cultural difference is often mobilized. The practice of circumcision of Dassanetch boys is repeatedly mentioned by the Turkana to account for the attacks they suffer.

⁶ Galaty (John), « Vue sur la violence : les frontières du conflit pastoral au Kenya », *Anthropologie et sociétés*, vol. 26, n°1, 2002, pp. 107-126.

The young Dassanetch initiates must indeed demonstrate their courage to show they deserve their entry into adulthood. Killing members of a rival ethnic group is a good way to endorse their change of social status from juniors to seniors. However, the Turkana insist that even though they are supported in their undertaking by



Photo: Wycliffe Ochieng
the rest of the group, it is only some selected members of the community who carry out attacks: there is not an involvement of the ethnic group in totality. This explains why the urban areas, unlike rural places, are seen as neutral territories between the two ethnic groups, where interethnic tensions are eased.

In reality, ethnic identities are fluid, and practices, norms and values are exchanged, merged, or reversed, until a conflict sets boundaries and crystallize the ethnic situation, more or less permanently. Ethnic identity is not a factor of control or restriction of the use of resources. The use by the ruling class of such a biased interpretation is a tool for political mobilization. Like religion or culture, ethnicity is manipulated to achieve or maintain a position of power within society. The ethnic criterion does not explain how animosity between ethnic groups arises, or how these ethnic identities can be simple representations used in the

context of conflicts underpinned by social, economic or territorial issues⁷. Contrary to what is often claimed, ethnicity does not play a crucial role in the genesis of conflicts. Proof of it is that rival ethnic communities tend to be reconciled in times of drought, calling for cooperation to survive.

2.3 The fragile and ambiguous role

of the state of Kenya

The state plays a key role in the conflict. Initiated by the British colonial administration and renewed by the Kenyan government, disarmament policy of the Turkana people, unbalances drastically ethnic relations, because Dassanetch and other ethnic groups in Ethiopia and Sudan (Nyngatom and Toposa) have kept their weapons. Social relations between the two communities are grounded on this security imbalance.

Moreover, no effort has been made to include economically and politically this nomadic community to the rest of the country. Since the setting of boundaries by the settlers, regional migration of the pastoralists in search of seek key natural resources has been limited, while no access to new essential resources were being granted. Territorial control has disrupted the pastoralists' livelihood

⁷ Lasserre (Frédéric), « Conflits hydrauliques et guerres de l'eau : un essai de modélisation », *Revue internationale et stratégique* 2007/2, No. 66, pp. 105-118.

that depends largely on the diversity of the whole Turkana ecosystem.

Furthermore the replacement of the traditional authorities formerly involved in conflict prevention and resolution by modern governmental institutions often considered illegitimate by the local people for the reason that they were imposed upon them, has worsened the situation.

Thus, north-western Kenya is still characterized by insecurity and is deprived of the benefit of an effective state protection. However, we cannot ignore state attempts to promote development: incentives and support to the development of agricultural sectors, efforts in health and primary education fields, etc... In the field of security, the government has tried to interfere in conflicts. The military presence in this region, although sufficient, is inefficient. Interventions are rare: without any clear direction army officers are reluctant to interfere in conflicts between pastoralists. Military interventions are conducted on an ad hoc basis, and in a violent manner, usually following raids that are said to be threatening the national security. In the absence of security provided by the state, armed force is the most effective way for the Turkana to defend themselves, thus fueling the cycle of attack/counter-attack⁸.

⁸ Galaty (John), « Vue sur la violence : les frontières du conflit pastoral au Kenya », *Anthropologie et sociétés*, vol. 26, n°1, 2002, pp. 107-126.

Conclusion

Conflicts between the Turkana and the Dassanetch around the shores of Lake Turkana cannot be explained without taking into account the natural, historical, socio-economic and political contexts in which the competition for resources takes place. It is through the analysis of these contexts that the real sources of conflict can be identified.

The expanse of Lake Turkana is inevitably shrinking, its northern part now disappearing and leaving fewer resources to the Ethiopians who depend on them. Conflicts taking place in the region are therefore local, but they have an international dimension as the environmental changes in this region have global causes. The responsible institutions, which for years have been ignorant of evolutions in the region, will have to take into account these changes and respond quickly.



Photo: Amélie Desgropes

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