ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the analysis of external and internal drivers of pastoral transformation (i.e. conflicts), their long-term impact on the pastoral livelihood, and community response mechanisms. The thesis examines the roles of a secessionist war and subsequent banditry and violent conflicts in the socio-economic transformation of the Waso Borana pastoralists of Northern Kenya. The thesis shows that a drastic decline in pastoral production following socio-political upheavals in the early years of Kenya’s independence has had major ramifications for pastoral economy and societal coping strategies. The Waso Borana’s responses to pastoral decline reflect changes as well as continuity of the pastoral way of life. The main change is the shift from the total dependence on pastoral production to a diversified economy that includes non-pastoral activities. Changes and continuity can be seen in the gendered responses to pastoral transformation, particularly in the roles played by women as part of their household’s coping strategy. This thesis focuses specifically on how women engage in market economies and how they mobilise resources for their households using indigenous social networks. Moreover, the thesis examines external initiatives such as the introduction of formal women’s organisations as part of the development agenda pursued by the state and other development agencies.

The thesis shows that processes of pastoral transformation are not linear but differ from one community to another and also between households within the same community. A fruitful insight into change and continuity in pastoral society cannot be adequately achieved without considering the peculiarity of the societal structure, historical background, and politics of a particular geographical location. In this regard, the thesis uses studies of three localities: Kinna, Kulamawe, and Merti, representing different livelihood strategies. Paper I examines the long-term impact of the Shifta war on Waso Borana pastoral production and societal responses. The main finding is that the protracted conflicts in the Waso rangeland resulted in human casualties, loss of livestock, and the displacement of populations. An assessment of livestock herd size in the three communities shows that households are not achieving the same levels of livestock growth compared to the pre-Shifta war period. The perception of the community is that the conflicts exacerbated the impact of environmental and economic turbulence. Recurrent drought, persistent banditry, and the changing ecology of the rangelands are blamed for the lack of recovery. The Shifta war has had numerous ramifications for the Waso Borana. Firstly, the massive loss of herds has had a long-term impact on pastoral economy, forcing many households out of pastoral production and into sedentary lifestyles. The responses of the community are discussed in papers II-IV.

Paper II shows that the conflicts reordered the economic system of the community, as many households have been forced to diversify their livelihoods. The type of livelihood adopted varies according to specific conditions and opportunities in each site, in addition to household characteristics. At the household level, factors such as the wealth status of the household as well as the age and gender of the household head have an impact on the diversification strategy. However, the opportunities for remittances from informal and formal employment by members of the family do not have a significant impact. The study also found that, despite diversifying their livelihood by adding non-pastoral activities, pastoral production continues to be a major economic base for the majority of households in the area. People sell their livestock to generate capital to start businesses and also use the profits to purchase more livestock. Diversification and pastoral production are found to be complementary, rather than contradictory.
In Paper III, I examine the impact of pastoral transformation on traditional roles, particularly of women. There are structural changes as women have become important players in the household food security. The finding is that women’s indigenous social networks, known as marro, manifest changes as well as continuities in the aftermath of the socio-economic transformation that followed the Shifta war. The continuity of marro is evident because all Waso Borana women participate in the social network, regardless of their social and economic status. The frequency of participation still varies with the needs and opportunities of the women. Across the three sites, factors such as the wealth status of the households and educational level of women have less impact on the frequency of participation. However, elderly women participate more in daily exchanges than young women. Comparing households with different livelihoods, it is evident that farming households have fewer reciprocal exchanges compared to others. Although, traditionally, food items were the more dominant form of marro exchange, today the sharing of labour is more popular. The introduction of cash loans within social networks is a new development for the Waso Borana. Introduction of the cash loan, however, transforms marro to a rational exchange and undermines its altruistic value.

Paper IV presents a case on the growth of formal women’s organisations, also known as women’s groups, among the Waso Borana. The study found that the growth of women’s groups is linked to the decline in pastoral economy, availability of alternative sources of funds to alleviate household food security, growth of community development initiatives, and urbanisation. The perception of the Waso Borana is that women’s groups provide opportunities for economic gains as well as a space for socialising, learning, developing awareness of women’s rights, and networking. A scrutiny of group membership shows that the majority of members are from poor households. Participation is also higher among younger women. However, women’s awareness of their rights does not automatically translate to political empowerment of women at community level. The political glass ceiling is blamed on the patriarchal power structures that are dominant within the Borana society.

The thesis concludes that pastoral communities are undergoing changes due to diverse external and internal pressures. Despite the challenges, pastoralism has proved to be resilient. This is evident from the fact that people continue to reinvest in pastoral production despite their involvement in other means of livelihood. This finding is essential for development agencies as it provides evidence that diversification does not indicate non-viability of pastoral production. Any development intervention in pastoral areas should therefore aim to complement pastoralism rather than replace it.