Coping with Disorder: Drinking Groups Among Men in Karamoja

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Abstract
The traditionally pastoral people of Karamoja live in an environment fraught with violence, poverty and disorder. However, they also just live life. In this article, I speak out against an imbalance, which exists in the literature on Karamoja; namely that it focuses primarily on the negative aspects of life in Karamoja, i.e. crime, violence and excessive drinking. In this article I want to nuance this. The data I present is gathered amongst youth in Karamoja living outside a pastoral life within the biggest town of the region. A group of people practically ignored in the literature. And albeit I recognise the fact that violence, crime and excessive drinking exist, I shed a more positive light on the everyday life of the Karimojong. I use the institution of drinking in semi-formal drinking groups as a lens for giving an insight into this; how the way of being together in a drinking group can become a space of freedom, unity and order in lives lived in an area of chaos and disorder, how negative drinking behaviour is scorned and sanctioned in order to keep the negative sides to drinking under control, and how being a member of a drinking group can be a means to move forward in life.

Key words: Coping with Disorder, Drinking Groups, Karamoja, Uganda
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Introduction

Karamoja is a geographically, economically and socially isolated region in the northeastern corner of Uganda. The landscape of the region is usually described as semi-arid and rainfall is unpredictable (Quam 1996; Dyson-Hudson 1972). The Karimojong are used to these harsh conditions and have through time developed survival strategies for living in such an area. A major strategy is to depend on cattle, although agricultural production of sorghum constitutes a large part of their nutrition (Quam 1978; Quam 1996). Moreover, during an extreme famine in the 1980s, churches and international organisation came into the region to provide food relief (Novelli 1988:137; Närman 2003:131; Quam 1996:2). Today the region is so entrenched in poverty that food relief have become part and parcel of survival.

This said, the Karimojong are a pastoral people and cattle are part of all aspects of life; socially, religiously, economically and politically (cf. Quam 1978, Barber 1962, Dyson-Hudson 1966). As in many pastoral peoples in East Africa, their lifestyle has since early time included cattle raiding against neighbouring groups and vice versa (Markakis 1993:13). Today, cattle raiding is not the only violence to which the Karimojong are subjected and to which they subject others; road banditry, theft and domestic violence are common occurrences (Nangiro 2005; Gray *et al.* 2003). Moreover, the Ugandan government maintains

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a strong military presence in the region, which at times results in fighting between the soldiers and Karimojong warriors (Knighton 2003; Nangiro 2005; Närman 2003). Against this background of violence, poverty and disorder, a lot of the literature paints a bleak picture when describing Karamoja. One example is that chronic drinking caused by the chaotic situation has now become a major problem and is ruining the traditional way of life (Quam 1996: 3; UNIRC 2004: 25).

I have elsewhere spoken out against this negative portrayal by focussing on the motivation for perpetration of violence within a context of two different systems of justice and power, the State and the Gerontocracy, and the various moralities relating to violence (Mosebo 2008). In this article, I follow on my previous argument and problematise the part of the negative portrayal, which is concerned with drinking. I hope thereby to provide the readers the knowledge that there are also many positive sides to the everyday lives of the Karimojong. I discuss the functioning of being in a drinking group and how this relates to ordering one's world on a small scale when the world is in disorder on the large scale. Part of this is showing how the negative sides to drinking are dealt with. Moreover, I will show there is a dynamic element in the sociality of drinking, because 'where' one drinks and 'what' one drinks are important indicators for one's social position, and can even be a stepping stone in improving one's social position. Overall, my argument is that the institution of drinking should not just be dismissed as a problematic way to deal with an insecure situation of life, but also serves as an important social activity to help my informants in their everyday life.

Methodology

The objective of my research was to gain insight into the manoeuvrings of young men in their search for a better future in an area with few paths to follow. I spent an overall of five months in Karamoja collecting data using mainly qualitative methods of participant observation, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Group interviews with elders and women as well as general informal conversation with people around me additionally helped in furthering my understanding.

I hired a young man to be my assistant, and he introduced me to the members of his 'drinking group', who became my one group of informants. A drinking group is a group of friends who meet at a regular drinking place to share *ngaagwe*, talk, laugh and play games.

> 'We walk around Camp Swahili, which is a huge place of houses and huts in clay, cement or iron sheets. We pass through a lane – so small I didn't even notice it was there – and find a small square between three clay houses; one divided in little rooms. We walk into one room, which is covered in the front by bamboo-looking sticks. Three youths dressed in shirts, jeans or trousers and sneaker are seated here. We explain our purpose and they welcome us. The room is about 3 x 2 meters. The soil floor is uneven. We sit on small chairs, and in the middle is a small dented metal table. Beside the table is a bucket with some brown looking porridge. It has several long tubes coming out from it. This is locally brewed beer, *ngaagwe*. The youths explain that this version of *ngaagwe* is made from maize and is called *marwa*. Once in a while the tubes are passed around for drinking. The room smells like yeast, clay and dirt. I can hear laughter and talking. As the sun sets, we move out into the compound' (field note).

The youths frequenting this drinking place had almost all finished high school and almost all held regular jobs. In other words, they had fairly stable socio-economic backgrounds. As

these informants lived somewhat privileged lives in relation to the general situation of life for most people in Karamoja, my assistant and I went out to the slum areas of town to get a more nuanced perspective.

> 'The slum area is quite small. There is a borehole for water and several women are gathered there. A group of men are drinking *ngaagwe* from water jugs. The place smells of yeast, garbage and dust. Round huts and a few square houses are scattered around. Children in dirty clothes are everywhere. Further towards the back of the place are small huts, and people are seated in the shades of houses. We arrive at a small market and pass a table where the cut-off head of a goat is surrounded by flies. Women are selling tobacco. We run into Matt, who takes us to a drinking place in the middle of a compound of a lady's house. He introduces of to a group of youth who are regulars there. They are seated on small stools in the shade of the house and later we move into a small round hut made from sticks. They drink their *ngaagwe* from water jugs, which are passed around as they explain that it is made from sorghum and is called *kwete*. They wear t-shirts and jeans, some of which are torn. I also notice that some of them have holes for the traditional earrings and one even has the traditional scarifications on his forehead' (field note).

This was a group of youths, who struggled to raise enough money to go on with their education. They looked for all the jobs they could get and were employed as informal teachers of the programme Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK), which gave them a small salary. Two of them had left behind the life of pastoralism in the village to seek another way of life in town.

I tried to engage in the groups as a member. Even though I was often the only woman there, women are at times included in the drinking groups. I also believe my status as a non-African, a *mzungu*, put me outside usual categories and thereby made me an acceptable member of the groups. I did worry at times that my participation as almost a member would present me with the problem of *informed consent* (cf. AAA 1998). Upon first meeting with my informants I made sure to explain my project and get their verbal consent, but I believe that after a while, some of my informants forgot that they were part of a study. I tried to keep updating them and in all situations I tried to sense whether someone was uncomfortable with my presence or that a certain issue was brought to my attention, and strove to react to that.

In the same vein, the discussion in ethnography on whether or not informants are aware that they are still "under study" in a private situation as opposed to a public one, made me think about the ramifications of being part of a study when one has had too much to drink (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). At those times when I felt someone had drunk too much, I would simply leave if it was possible, so that they were in control of what they wanted to disclose to me.

Drinking as a Social Act

The act of drinking has almost always been part of anthropological studies, because it is part of various ritual and social occasions as well as everyday life for most peoples (G. D. S. 1964; Heath 1987). However, it was not until the 1960s that anthropologists started to focus on drinking, and the meaning of it in various cultural contexts. The ethnographic studies that emerged at this times spoke out against theoretical formulation categorising drinking behavior into the 'integrative', the

'disintegrative' and the 'anxiety reduction' categories (G. D. S. 1964: 341). They argued that these categories are not adequate in themselves to describe drinking behavior, as it can be a matter of all three, can serve a purpose for the specific occasion, or can serve other purposes as well (cf. Leacock 1964; Lemmert 1964; Netting 1964). The act of drinking, drinking behavior as well as motivations for drinking should be seen from the viewpoint of the specific social and cultural context.

It is widely acknowledged that drinking is a social form of being together as humans and is a large part of social life (Karp 1980). Drinking alone does not carry the same significant social meanings as does drinking together. Karp writes about the Karimojong's Iteso neighbors that their beer drinking is their social theory (Karp 1980: 83ff). Beer becomes a symbol of solidarity and sociability, "which expresses the ideal form of relations between men". I believe these arguments are transferable to the Karimojong.

Creating a Sense of Order

The reason I mainly refer to drinking groups is that all my informants on a normative level considered drinking a social activity; hence referring to the 'integrative' aspect of drinking. Drinking alone was not considered proper. One day I arrived at one of the drinking places and noticed a youth from one of the other drinking groups sitting alone drinking while reading a book. This seemed odd to me, because the groups were usually not more formal that you would just join another group for the evening in case the members of one's own drinking group had not shown up. Moreover, it seemed odd for the members of my drinking group, who deemed the youth "strange". The way they talked about his actions indicated that it was definitely not a socially accepted behaviour within the drinking groups. There are two underlying reasons for this; firstly, drinking alone would mean that someone was addicted and/or drank alcohol to forget about life's hardship – such as 'anxiety-reducing' behaviour. This was not a socially accepted way to deal with hardship, although my informants did at times agree they drank for this reason. Secondly, the act of drinking was only one aspect of being in the group. For my informants, the group had other and more socially accepted functions: a main activity in the drinking groups were *sharing ideas* – as my informants termed it – about how to move on in life and if one of the group members had a problem, the group would advise and console him. Additionally, it was a forum for relaxing, joking around and playing card games, which my informants could do in this particular space, because they were among equals.

My informants live in a social environment with a traditional politico-social system of gerontocracy. This means that in almost all other aspects of their life, their social position of youth subjects them to respecting and adhering to their elders, which means that their freedom of action to certain degree is restrained. One day I was walking in town with one of my informants, who pointed and said: *"There is another drinking place, but it's for older people. We can't drink there, because we can't drink in front of our fathers"*. In the group they were equal and could shake off some inhibitions, they had in other social situations. The mode of drinking furthermore enforced this. Elmeland (1996: 82; 113) writes that the act of drinking creates unity in that the sense of intoxication functions to pull together people and lightens social constraints. Drinking in a proper social way can thus be an indicator of socially censured roles, such as the relations of respect and inhibitions between generations, but it also defines social valued roles as the one of

equality and unity amongst peers (cf. Netting 1964: 377). The drinking group was considered a space of freedom and a space to feel comfortable as one of the group.

In order to keep equality and unity in the group, members were obligated to keep a balance in the level of intoxication, which is also exemplified in the way of drinking: the *ngaagwe* would be passed around in the circle and everyone made sure everyone else was offered a taste[1]. This way the group members make sure that the others take in the same amount of alcohol as themselves. It is a way of keeping control on a very practical level. Furthermore, the drinking group in the slum area had a rule saying that if someone had "over-drunk" he would have to leave for the evening. The drinking group within Camp Swahili appointed one of their members as captain and he has to make sure order was held in the group; e.g. to tell someone to leave when they were too drunk. The upholding of control and order relates to the "underlife" of drinking (Karp 1980: 113), thus the negative side of the coin or the 'disintegrative' aspect of drinking. My informants all agreed that "over-drinking" could cause trouble. If someone started becoming rude and quarrelsome, this was a disturbance to the group's unity and equality, as this case will show:

> 'I am at a dance at Hotel Leslona and am dancing with some of the group members. All of a sudden I hear chairs falling over and turn around to see what's happening. Ahmad is falling into the chairs. Sean is standing four meters away facing him, while Ahmad's older brother and some others are holding him by the arms. He looks very angry. Ahmad gets up with difficulty. Others are now struggling to hold him back. Both are very drunk. The people, I dance with, say: *"Let's move over here"* and continue dancing (I'm confused. Why don't they interfere when their friends are fighting?)
> Marianne: *"We just dance?"*
> Edward: *"We can't take sides,'cause we're friends with both. So we have to stay outside"*

Sean and Ahmad had both been drinking too much that night and lost control of themselves and the situation. Elmeland writes that in situations when someone has had too much to drink often that person is excluded from the group (1996: 80). This is not necessarily physically, but can also be a social exclusion based on not being on the same level as the rest. The situation in this case took place at a public party outside the usual realm of the drinking group, and the members of the group had no mandate to tell their friends to leave. Instead, they created an imaginary boundary between themselves and the two drunken friends in order to keep unity in the group in the future. In the following weeks, Ahmad and Sean did not show up at the drinking place, but eventually they made up and came back to the group. None of the other members had interfered and there was thus no "bad blood" between any of the members anymore. The group was once again united as a whole. In contrast, when I left for home a couple of months later, the relationship between Ahmad and his brother was not mended. Ahmad was angry with his brother for taking Sean's side and did not want anything to do with him.

This was a situation, which showed the negative side of the coin; when drinking creates disorder. My informants mentioned many times that alcohol had a bad side to it; it could cause conflict and violence between family and friends; it could cause you to

[1] I was inspired to this by Elmeland's (1996) analysis of the Danish custom of saying "skål", making sure everyone at the party raises their glass at the same time.

commit crime in order to get money; to forget about school or work; and it could even kill you – by deteriorating the body slowly or fast, because if you are intoxicated you can let down your guard and walk in the wrong place at the wrong time. These are all actions that indicate a loss of control over one's deeds, and where one's actions somehow come to take place within the space of the disorder of the area – violence, poverty and bad health. Somewhat tautological, my informants would explain that these actions were caused by "over-drinking", and "over-drinking" was a result of the hardship caused by the disorder.

Keeping a balance and control over drinking was therefore important, because it was a matter of protecting oneself and each other. It was about having a space to relax and feel free but it was also a space, which could be controlled. In the drinking groups, my informants could create order in a micro-level aspect of their everyday life, while living in area that was quite chaotic on a macro-level. Living in Karamoja is fraught with uncertainty and unpredictability, but the space of the drinking groups was something that to a higher degree could be administered and controlled, and – maybe paradoxically – this is what caused it to be a space of freedom and relaxation.

Drinking and Social Position

Drinking can moreover be a way of placing oneself in one's social environment. Elmeland argues that the type of beverage one drinks correspond to the social group to which one belongs (1996: 56). Although she writes from a Danish context I think my informant, Loriang, from the slum area will agree with me in saying that this can be transferred to Karamoja:

> "Kwete [sorghum ngaagwe] is a line of poverty... it's like this eh? If you have money, so you will be taking what?... marwa [maize ngaagwe]..., if this money again increased, you shift again to bottled beer? mmm, so kwete is the last what?.. the last group of ngaagwe...off course this one even though you get 200 or 100 you can take [drink] ... so that is why I'm saying it's in a poverty line eeh. ... but it is even better to take to take this kwete than this one, ... because marwa consumes a lot of money.."

Loriang explains that what you drink shows your social position in the world, mainly because it relates to the amount of money you are able to pay. Many people drink *kwete*, because it is the cheapest so you get more for the little money you have. If you drink *marwa* it shows somewhat of a higher standing and bottled beer is at the highest end of the scale. This is enforced in what my two groups of informants drank; Loriang's group in the slum area drank *kwete*, whereas the other group drank *marwa*.

One member of the latter group is however an interesting case and his situation shows that the 'where' and the 'what' one drinks does not necessarily correspond to one's actual social position, but can be about the social position, one hopes for or sees oneself in. Bobbi lived in the slum area and had not managed to finish school due to financial difficulties. He did not hold a regular job, but was a teacher of ABEK. The characteristics of his situation should therefore put him in the group of *kwete* - drinkers, but actually he was part of the *marwa* - drinking group in town. He would at times come to the drinking place in the slum area to greet me, but when the group offered him *kwete*, he would decline saying: *"I don't drink in daytime"*. The one time I did see him drink in daytime, he made sure to say that this was a situation out of the ordinary (cf. Elmeland 1996: 58). Bobbi had this norm, because he associated with the *marwa* - drinking group, who would work during the day and gather in

the evenings for drinking. In their group drinking clearly marked the difference between work and pleasure (cf. Elmeland 1996: 55). Drinking in daytime indicates that you have no-where else to be, no work to do and no school to go to.

Another difference lies in the reasons for drinking. The *kwete*-drinkers drank *ngaagwe* as part of their nourishment, i.e. they literally referred to it as food, whereas the *marwa*-drinkers drank for leisure before going home for supper. As Bourdieu writes: *"The true basis of the differences found in the area of consumption, and far beyond it, is the opposition between the tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the tastes of necessity"* (Bourdieu 1979: 177). When one drinks *kwete* it is a clear sign that one does not have much money to buy stable food and the *ngaagwe* becomes a necessity.

The question, however, remains why Bobbi did not just choose to sit all day and drink the affordable *kwete* together with youths in the same position as him. My argument is that in the long run Bobbi found it more profitable to avoid associating with them. Bourdieu writes that the interest one has in self-presentation and the investment one is ready to make is directly proportional to what one expects to gain from it (Bourdieu 1979: 202). Bobbi hoped that by investing some economic capital in drinking the more expensive beverage, he hoped to gain 'social' and 'cultural capital', which could later be converted back into economic capital (cf. Bourdieu 1977); social capital he would gain by networking with people, who had jobs and contacts, and cultural capital by sharing knowledge and ideas with educated people. My informants in both groups would always say that being in a drinking group was good for *sharing ideas* about the future and therefore help raise each others standards of thinking and ambition.

Conclusion

Karamoja is a place of instability due to different forms of violence and living within Karamoja is defined by insecurity and disorder at the macro-level. Is has been this way for a long time, which has to large extend resulted in research and literature focusing mainly on the negative consequences and aspects of Karimojong life. In this article I have tried giving an insight into the other side of the story. I have described Karimojong youths who try to order and control their life on a micro-level and in this way create a space of freedom, relaxation and order for themselves. I have furthermore tried to show that they use this space to try to move on in life, e.g. by furthering one's social position through a social network. Generally I have tried to show the positive side of the coin more so than the oft-described negative one. I believe it is important to acknowledge that although my informants lived in areas of poverty, violence and disorder, they also just try to live their everyday lives and move towards a better future.

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