

The Usual Suspects: Collective Irresponsibility and Debates of Culpability in Northern Kenyan Pastoralist Violence

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Abstract:

Focusing on the dynamics of a recent violent incident between Samburu and Turkana pastoralists--ending with the killing of 42 Kenyan policemen by Turkana cattle raiders--I explore issues concerning assigning culpability in African pastoralist violence.

Consonant with the longstanding anthropological concept of "collective responsibility," governments have tended to hold all members of an ethnic group responsible for violence, leading to collective punishment and/or taking actions against local chiefs for incidents in their locality. While overlapping ethnic identities and roles have probably always made the world much fuzzier than anthropological models suggest, in state situations--where the aim is to assign culpability, allot punishment and render compensation--motives and actions become far more complex. While the victims of violence gain by asserting the collective guilt of perpetrators, perpetrators of violence benefit by assuming a stance of "collective irresponsibility": That it is the violence was done by individuals or by a distinct sub-group who are similar but nonetheless Other to themselves. Using a case study approach, the paper draws on discourses, and individual histories of involved parties (with whom I have worked closely), to examine the dynamics of individual, collective and state actions in debating and reacting to African pastoralist violence.