

Simultaneous Yet Contradictory Relationships between the Turkana and Refugees in Kakuma Area, Northwestern Kenya

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Abstract:

This presentation describes simultaneous yet contradictory relationships, both violent and peaceable, between the refugees at Kakuma camp in northwestern Kenya, and their host population, the pastoral Turkana. Recent studies emphasize escalation of inter- and intra-ethnic violence among East African pastoral societies. They attribute it to conflict over natural resources, proliferation of small-arms, commercialization of livestock raiding, decline of social order and collapse of social norms (i.e. gerontocracy), politicization of ethnicity, etc. Although there is some truth in these arguments, this presentation emphasizes that Turkana have innovatively developed positive social relationships as well, through face-to-face interactions with the refugees. Kakuma refugee camp was established in 1992, and its population was more than 95,000 in 2005 at its highest, most of them from Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia. Turkana and refugees had many conflicts, sometimes with physical violence. At the collective level, Turkana and refugees are antagonistic, representing each other negatively. However, at the same time, they created close economic and social relationships at the individual level. They cultivated these peaceable relationships through tireless face-to-face interactions, and these personal relationships were indispensable for both of them to cope with the new and unpredictable situations.