

Transformation Of The Livelihoods Of The Karamojong

To critically engage modernist interlocutions in detail, I analyze the ambiguities and contradictions that have been engendered by the uncritical construction and allocation of modern housing units to ordinary Karamojong, as an indication of the transformation which the government so eagerly desires for the people of Karamoja. In critiquing modernity, this essay also examines the extent to which a postmodern discourse is relevant, in raising key questions about the discourse of development while deconstructing the understandings entailed in descriptions of modernity.

The Modernism of Government approaches for Transforming Karamoja:

The project of modernization in Karamoja has a concrete historical context dating back to Karamoja's encounter with colonialism. The colonial state, under the mistaken belief that Karamojong were incapable of rational economic decisions due to an emotional/cultural attachment to their livestock, and their perception of Karamojong either as inherently 'conservative' or incapable of intellect, pursued measures to modernize the Karamojong. The colonial policies adopted in the name of modernization served instead the expropriation and appropriation of economic surplus from Karamoja. It has been correctly argued by dependency scholars (e.g. Rodney, 1972) that through colonialism, colonies such as Karamoja were underdeveloped as a deliberate undertaking by the more economically advanced European countries.

After independence, many of the economic structures and policies put in place by the colonial state continued, which further perpetuated Karamoja's underdevelopment. The coming to power of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in 1986, for the first time, marked a break with the past, with government coming out boldly to proclaim its desire to genuinely develop Karamoja. Over the past 26 years, many positive interventions have been undertaken by government, which have set Karamoja on a road to recovery. This notwithstanding, the NRM had maintained a vitriolic condemnation of nomadic tendencies associated with Karamojong pastoralism. The characterization by the government of nomadic practices associated with pastoralism as antecedents of tradition subsumed in the advanced civilization of the 21st century is an inherently modernist discourse to the extent pastoralism is depicted as being in transition from a still 'backward' culture to settled forms of livestock production which are considered amenable to commercialization (read modernization).

Government has openly proclaimed a total rejection of pastoralism for perpetuating nomadism among the Karamojong, on grounds that in the 21st century, the Karamojong cannot be encouraged and assisted to live nomadic lifestyles as their ancestors did, forever wandering with their cattle, from one place to another, in search of water and pastures. Government has openly proclaimed that the transformation of Karamoja is

possible, and leaving the Karamojong marginalised and isolated would lead to their eventual extinction.

Modernity is a philosophical discourse of western Europe that concerned the conditions of living imposed by the socioeconomic process that were associated with the development of productive forces of capitalism which was characterized by mechanization. It represented a break with the pre-industrial era which was associated with the enlightenment period. Modernity is deployed to typify a break with tradition, and a rejection of everything that was associated with the past. The idea of modernity was bound up with the notion of critical reason, which was associated with a tradition that questioned anything, including everything that was transcendental about the period before the present. Under modernity, no condition was permanent, and modernity was constantly in conflict with tradition as it strived to create a new universal morality.

In a modernity discourse, pastoralists are viewed as possessing a psychological attraction to cattle. Due to this cultural affinity to large herds, pastoralists will tend to overstock, which leads to overgrazing. This argument was advanced by tragedy of the commons theorists, who argued that the behavior of pastoralists were influenced by the choices open to them, and that pastoralism could only be developed if there was a stimulus to free the pastoralists from their cultural bondage through establishment of new institutions of ownership of land that privatized and individualized rights, which compelled them to internalize their externalities, hence bear the cost of every extra head of cattle they kept, meaning that they were compelled to sell some of their animals and invest in buying land and improving in livestock production infrastructure.

A modernity discourse would view tradition as impairing to rational thought, which through reason provides the only credible approach to arrive at the truth. For rationalism, reason was not dependent on experience, history or anything handed from the past, hence the authority of tradition, for example, in explaining the behavior of pastoralist was challenged. Rationalism was embodied in the philosophy of Descartes, who put his confidence in 'the operation of rational mind which is not encumbered by the 'dead hand of the past', and for whom traditions, when carefully analyzed, 'amounted to nothing but a chaos of customs and unverified opinions which mostly fail the test of reason' (see Gross, 1992: 25).

For modernity, there was no place for traditional practices and institutions. A break with the past was vigorously pursued, in both temporal and spatial terms, in order to embrace something totally more advanced than pastoralism, such as livestock ranching and dairy farming, or settled crop farming. Changes were introduced in land use and property relations in cattle keeping areas not only to end nomadism, but also to transform the Karamojong. The individualized land ownership, which commenced during the colonial period continued through establishment of resettlement schemes, which replaced common property systems. Most of these schemes however failed to materialize.

Modernity did not attack tradition for the sake of it, but an assault on tradition enabled the cultivation of something new that authorized the present in an entirely different way from that in which it had been ordered in the past (Gross, 1992: 28). It is in this context that this essay wishes to use a postmodern discourse to critique the attempts to transform Karamoja and the Karamojong through one of the numerous interventions being undertaken under the NRM government, namely, the introduction of modern houses.

A Post-Modern critique of Modernity Discourses on Karamoja Transformation:

Modernity set the scenes for its own downfall. Defining modern in terms of what was current could not continue unchallenged, especially after questions began to be raised about the unfulfilled promise of modernities, which set the stage for a search of an alternative to modernity. As time went by, the much anticipated annihilation of everything that was associated with traditional forms was never to be. This set the foundation for a postmodern discourse, for which, there were actually no walls between tradition and modernity in the ways in which this was claimed by the modernists. Modernity was not able to construct a whole new aesthetic world in which all problems of pastoralists were solved by modernization. In fact modernization did not solve the problems it set out to, such as enhanced happiness and improved welfare, let alone fomenting a whole new set of challenges that needed to be addressed.

There is a sense in which modernity was perceived as an autonomous drive towards progress away from tradition, which signified a cyclical movement from one crisis to another until even the essence of the progress that was anticipated could no longer be sustained, and as modernity became associated with aesthetics of change for the sake of change, a rupture occurs whose understanding necessitated an alternative discourse of the postmodern. Modernity generated contradictions and ambiguities in the modern life-worlds of pastoralists.

Unlike modernity which was unpretentious in its leitmotif to repudiate any association with anything traditional, postmodernism recognized that modernity was so engrained in modern society, that there was hardly any aspect of life that was not touched by it. It was for this reason that postmodernism pre-eminenced diversity and pluralities of life-forms and social relations, in contradistinction to modernity's universal morality. Such recognition holds true for pastoralists who do not live in a bounded society. The world around them which they interface with on a continuous daily basis entailed high levels of technological development of forces of production and abstraction of labor. The high levels of specialization of production and ensuing division of labor associated with late capitalism resulted in anonymity in the social organization of production, in ways that did not leave pastoralism unscathed.

Modernity freed pastoralism from the constraints that not only tradition but also, to a large extent, the physical environment imposed on its productive potential, without necessarily enabling it to restructure itself to respond adequately to the challenges this

generated. For example, commercialization of production that comes with modernization of pastoralism means pastoralists can participate in the market to sell livestock products and buy other necessities they do not produce at the household level, and yet they are unable to effectively compete in the livestock product market because of stringent phyto-sanitary conditions and requirements, for beef and dairy products in the more lucrative exports markets.

Case Study: From the Traditional 'manyattas' to Modern Housing estates in Karamoja

The traditional setting in Karamoja is characterized by a very specific form of housing that entails the construction of small round huts that are thatched with grass and have walls made out of mud and wattle, with no windows and a single door (see figure 1). For beautification, the hut floor and walls made out of soil, are smeared with cow dung and sometimes patterns made on black clay soils using white/grey ash and red soils. The Pokot hut (see figure 3) varies slightly from the hut in other parts of Karamoja (see figure 1, 5, 6), just like the Karamojong hut varies from that in Turkana (see figure 4).

The introduction and promotion of modern houses (see figure 2) in Karamoja is part of the government's strategy to provide decent accommodation and transform the living conditions of the people of Karamoja, including civil servants but more specifically ordinary Karamojong in the villages. Government has been explicit about its commitment to transforming Karamojong manyattas into modern and better places to live in. Each unit of a modern house comprises three room (two bedrooms and one sitting room), plus an outside kitchen and store, and a solar panel for electricity. The houses were also furnished with beddings and cooking utensils, among other things. Model houses have been constructed in Nakapelimen (Camp Swahili) village in Moroto municipality and at Nadunget, in Nadunget sub-county, among others. The modern low cost houses constructed using hydra form technology imported by government from South Africa. The stimulus for the change in housing was external, although it should be recognized that modern housing had already been introduced in many parts of Karamoja, especially in the urban areas, and in some villages, even if the hut is the main form of housing.

This passage from the traditional manyatta to the modern housing units embodied a signification of ideas that would help us understand not only the ideological foundation of government's modernization discourse in Karamoja in general and pastoralism in particular, but also the contradictions that this entailed, and their implication for the ordinary people of Karamoja. Government's perception of modernity with respect to the change desired in Karamoja embodied a break with the past, in both temporal and spatial terms, to embrace something totally new. This transformation in the area of housing entailed abandonment of the manyatta and its embodiment of knowledge and history, and constructing modern houses next to the manyatta (see figure 2), thereby, entering an unoccupied space and establishing a new presence to exemplify a new beginning on the road to modernity.

The physical outlay of huts inside the manyatta (see figure 1) was never a representation of a free form of rural-space organization. The nature of traditional huts in which the majority of the Karamojong live, and their physical arrangement socially represented a materialization of space inhabited by the inhabitants of the manyatta. Even when the manyatta grows spontaneously, the arrangement of huts is never haphazard. A transition from the manyattas to modern houses certainly signifies a change in this materiality which informs the spatial and temporal organizations of the huts. Consideration of happiness and security are paramount to the Karamojong, and this was as much a technical question as it was an aesthetic one. This kind of logic appeared lacking for modern houses that were built outside urban centres, such as those at Nadunget (see figure 2). The historicity of organization of settlements in Karamoja was not extended to construction of modern houses.

In an attempt to mimic the traditional manyatta setting, the modern houses were built in some sort of a circle, but which failed to depict the structural arrangement of the huts internal to the huts inside the thorn stockade enclosure. Each modern house was allocated to a household head, invariably male, the modern manyatta represented an attempt to re-engineer gender relationships, because in polygamous unions, households that take up residence in the houses would have to occupy more than one wife in each house at any one moment, or one of the wives would remain in the manyatta. The traditional setting, where a home comprised multi-unit dwellings, with each wife being in possession of her separate hut, is, under the new concept of the modern manyatta being superseded by the monotony of single unit dwellings.

The Karamojong huts and manyattas are not only a visual expression of aesthetic beauty of Karamojong permanent homesteads, but also an embodiment of social values that define the Karamojong in terms of who they are, and what they think about others around them. The traditional manyatta had a very specific pattern of occupying space. That is why the thorn stockade, which is so thick that a bullet would not penetrate its interior, exists around most settlements. The enclosed space gives a visual expression of an ideal Karamojong community. The scattering of modern houses, covering almost twice the area of the manyattas, epitomizes a sense of loneliness and fear, which in the past insecurities was an invitation to an attack, even by habitual criminals. The space left in the middle of the manyatta is not merely anonymous space. It is intended as a night kraal (Atamanawi), and its central location in middle of all huts in the settlement means that to get to the cattle, one has literally to have gone through all the manner of defense at hand in the manyatta. It was not an innocent space. There is a space for goats (anok) or calves, a main gate that ushers one into the manyatta (epiding). Inside the manyatta, huts that belong to a single family unit, of a man, his wives and adult children are usually clustered together with a common gate that leads to the exterior of the thorn stockade (ekidori). The more the number of livestock possessed by the members of the community, the large this space. The modern houses represent “the worst features of a heartless utilitarian rationalism” , since consideration was mainly on the fact that Karamojong had to start to appreciate living in better accommodation,

which is less crowded. And I am not alone in thinking like this. The New Vision editorial team described these modern houses as “only an excuse for a house”.

The Karamojong huts are built by Karamojong women, using local materials and the rudimentary technology available to them. The traditional division of labor in Karamoja is such that the men cut and fix the poles. Women collect the grass and vines, as well as building and thatching the huts, occasionally assisted their children and fellow women. The construction of huts is a social process, whose completion is celebrated as a signification of the beauty of subject. In the eyes of their husbands, a well thatched hut is a manifestation of the inner beauty of the handy-woman by which her sexuality is celebrated by an entire community. With the modern houses, the Karamojong, like argued by Schorske (1967: 64), ‘lost a sense of relationship to their houses’, and with it, the integration of settlement with their fragile environment had also been interfered with.

There is often more to the locationality and siting of huts inside the enclosure than merely a spatial projection of social values through the construction of huts. The siting on the manyattas depended on several factors such as proximity to main road, access to water and grazing pastures, defense of the herd from opportunistic attacks. The houses could be dismantled with ease and materials still in good conditions moved to a new location. The cause of movement could be associated with unexplained death of members of the families or increased vulnerability to attacks from livestock raiders, or loss of livestock. This is almost inconceivable with the modern houses, which invariably intended as a sign of sedentarization of the beneficiary community.

The Karamoja heat (which averages 45^ocentigrade during dry weather) means that the traditional huts were designed to offer a natural cooling effect during the day; while safeguarding the people from the extreme coldness at night, a characteristic which is lacking with the poorly ventilated modern houses. These houses were built with three small windows. The huts are short and small because of difficulty accessing construction materials, and also a form of adaptation to strong winds that seasonally blow from the mountain escarpment to the East of Karamoja. Placing corrugated iron on the roof of a structure a few meters from the ground surface makes these modern houses extremely uninhabitable when the Karamoja heat sets in. In many ways these houses do not reach out to their users, who prefer instead to rent them out and earn some income to sustain their families. These houses are called ‘modern’ by their purveyors, a characterization which I do not agree with, largely on account of the discordances referred to above. Apart from simply being different from the Karamojong huts in terms of materials used and being fitted with a solar panel, there is nothing significantly modern about their air circulation system.

The traditional huts are temporary structures with a grass-thatch and mud and wattle walls. The modern houses are permanent structures made out of hydraform brick walls, with cement floor, and roofed using corrugated iron sheets. The houses have also been fitted with solar panels to supply electricity, a kitchen for cooking and a pit latrine. These modern houses embellished the commencement of the end of vestiges of tradition as

characterized not necessarily in the nature of housing, but all aspects of their lives. It represented a movement towards individualized ownership vested in the head of the households when in the traditional setting; the ownership of huts was vested in the women who each constructed her huts where her husband would come to find her. The huts have no beds, may be a mattress, although often it was a hide. The modern houses were in all respects a representation of modernity. They are houses for houses' sake, and yet to argue as such means to recognize that there was some rationality to traditional huts, their architecture, location, size and shape. There was a morality associated with these types of huts. Is the setting in the modern houses not difficult to defend in case of an external raid? What functions are represented in the way the traditional huts were spatially organized? Do they have what Schorske (1967: 36) termed as 'ideational significance'?

The distance from one family to another and from one hut to another is purposeful. The traditional Karamojong society comprised rational individuals, whose manyattas were an adaptation to nature. The short distance from the traditional huts in the manyatta into the modern iron-roofed houses represents a perceived incongruence between the traditional and the modern, from which the Karamojong, just like their system of livestock production is expected to transition at the behest of the state that seeks an individualized articulation of the population, in their transformation. It is a representation of incompatibility between the traditional and the modern. An embrace of the modern housing is epitomized by the disintegration of the traditional society and its edifices, in as much as the play of traditional authority and power relations may be affected. The transition represents the end of an era, and for me, presents a symbol of a critique of the type of modernity being purveyed in Karamoja.

There is an embodiment of knowledge in the traditional manyatta that the modern houses are incapable of signifying. The people were asked whether they appreciated the modern houses, and of course they said they did. Who would not accept a free gift? Whether the beneficiaries of the modern houses were prepared for the modernity can be revealed from the handling of the houses. Whether they actually stayed in the houses during the day and slept in them at night was contestable. Many of those allocated houses hadn't moved wholly to the modern houses. They stay in the modern houses whenever it was convenient. When visitor come, they will show you their modern houses, and at night most return to the huts nearby to sleep. The modern houses have poor ventilation, and considering the heat in Karamoja, they are very hot during the day and cold during the night, unlike grass thatched and mud and wattle huts.

The aesthetic beauty of the entire manyatta setting only becomes apparent when contrasted with the modern houses, without whose presence next to the manyatta, it would not have been easy to comprehend the imposing beauty of the landscape that the presence of the manyattas creates. The contrasting view from the sky as one lands it at the Nadunget airstrip in Moroto is there for any one to behold. There is a sense of

rigidification imposed by the modern houses that only those who have lived in the traditional huts can appreciate.

It is Eagleton (2006: 12) who argued that at the height of 20th century modernity, modernism always displayed some primitivist features akin to the pre-modern - a primitivism which went hand-in-hand with the growth of modern cultural anthropology that led to the emergence of a postmodern guise. Yes it did, at least to the extent that the traditional refused to wither away; and this was to become a form of romanticization of popular culture, which now plays the expressive, spontaneous, quasi-utopian role which 'primitive' cultures had played previously.

Conclusion:

My intention in deconstructing modernism associated with the transformation discourse in Karamoja was, not to seal it in its own limitations, but to open it up to heterogeneous possibilities by destabilizing its master narratives. In Karamoja where traditions, customs and values from the past are still very much alive, the construction of modern houses for distribution to ordinary Karamojong was inherently a very good gesture, although it is certainly problematic. The design and construction of these houses does not integrate the history of the people as well as their other experiences, especially on matters of location and aesthetics. The houses did not take into account the value of re-creating the diverse experiences of communities, which is usually embodied in the construction of traditional settlements. As it is, the traditional notions of physical planning of settlements have been more or less ignored.

The manner in which local communities are being transformed is the wrong way. The communities have not been empowered to transform themselves, and this means that they will not be able to build these houses for themselves. They will always wait for the state to come and build houses for them. While welcomed by beneficiaries, these low cost houses were still unaffordable for the majority to construct them on their own. The concept of modern houses for urban areas needs to be differentiated from modern houses for rural areas. I would like to argue that it would be worthwhile considering using grass to thatch round (or even square) huts constructed using hydraform bricks, as this constitutes a signification of the traditional interfacing with the modern.

While useful to understand the limits of modernism, the postmodern discourse also has its own challenges. For example, there is a morality associated with Karamojong housing, that is not individual, but influenced by traditions, which are dynamic. Blending the traditional and the modern on matters of morality offers the biggest challenge for a post-modern discourse where the moral is personal, in so far as it justifies diversity. As a western concept, I therefore find it useful mainly to the extent that it does entail western universalism.