

Arms Availability and Violence in the Ethiopia-Kenya-South Sudan Borderland[†]

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Is there any correlation between arms availability and violence intensification or conflict frequency? It has been reported that the proliferation of automatic rifles has increased the seriousness and frequency of conflicts over the past 40 years in East African pastoral societies. Early literature insisted that pastoral societies have been inundated with uncontrolled youth violence due to new rifles. However, much of the research shared a technologically-deterministic bias. This study focuses on the conflict dynamics of pastoral groups after the proliferation of automatic rifles to examine the relationship between arms availability and violence. I show that the pastoral peoples in the border area of Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan have controlled the extensive use of violence and maintained local order. To examine the relationship between arms availability and violence, it is important to consider the historical processes in place after the proliferation of new arms, the social and cultural contexts in which the groups with new arms are embedded, and people's agency to control the violence.

I

Is there any correlation between firearms availability and violence intensification or conflict frequency? Although much of the literature focuses on the arms, conflicts, and violence, this relationship has not been properly analysed. In his paper published in 1990, George Raudzens wrote, '(e)ven including the latest publications, weapons impact analysis... has not received more than marginal attention from scholars...(W)e have assertions, images, and impressions of technological decisiveness in war but we have no detailed measurement, analysis, or consensus'¹. After almost 20 years, Thomas Jackson and Nicholas Marsh, who extensively reviewed the literature on the topic, concluded that 'research is not yet sufficiently clear to definitively state that increased availability of firearms causes an increase in homicide'². Their conclusion is also applicable to research on the East African pastoral societies.

A number of pastoral groups with populations of several thousand to several hundred thousand people are widely distributed throughout the dry and low lands of East Africa. Inter-ethnic conflicts have occurred for many years around the border areas of Ethiopia,

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¹ Raudzens, 'War-winning weapons', pp. 403, 432.

² Jackson and Marsh, 'Guns and deaths', pp.120-1.

South Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda. Many reports by researchers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations asserted that the proliferation of automatic rifles has drastically changed the intensity of violence and increased the frequency of conflict. At the end of the 1970s, when several national political upheavals occurred in this region, automatic rifles flooded pastoral societies around the border area³.

For example, Jon Abbink insisted that the Suri society of south-western Ethiopia were inundated with violence perpetrated by youths with AK-47s. Since 1987, when automatic rifles were introduced, the traditional rules of the battlefield that regulated the exercise of violence have declined. Abbink described this change: ‘The new technology of violence itself transformed ritual violence into real violence due to the decline of the role of what Robin Fox has called “circuit breakers”’⁴. According to Abbink, ‘the new technology of violence itself’ has destroyed these social norms and real or uncontrolled violence has become widespread.

These studies shared a technologically-deterministic way of thinking⁵. They insisted that the violence associated with the new arms caused chaos in those societies. In contrast, I focus on the historical processes and socio-cultural contexts where the new arms rifles were introduced and proliferated. George Raudzens pointed out that ‘(i)t [the introduction of new arms] has been more obvious in its effects on the way people fight rather than on the outcomes of combat. New weapons have changed soldiers’ behavior’⁶. For analysing the relationship between firearms availability and violence intensification or conflict frequency, it is necessary to clarify how local people use the new firearms, interpret their experiences on the battlefield, change their behaviours, and how these new behaviours influence violence intensification or conflict frequency.

In this paper, I analyse the conflict dynamics of pastoral peoples in East Africa after the proliferation of automatic rifles to examine the relationship between arms availability and violence. The data analysed in this paper was collected during 14 months of fieldwork between 2001 and 2006.

II

The Daasanach live in the border areas of Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan. Their population in Ethiopia is approximately 65,000 people, according to the 2016 census. In addition, some of Daasanach live in north-western Kenya.

Six ethnic groups live around the Daasanach. They refer to the Kara and Arbore to the north as ‘our people’ (*gaal kinnyo*). The two groups have maintained peaceful relations with the Daasanach. In contrast, the Turkana to their southwest, the Gabra to their southeast, the Nyangatom to their northwest, and the Hamar to their northeast are referred to as *kiz* or ‘enemy’. Indeed, there are frequent small-scale attacks (*sulla*) between the Daasanach and enemy groups, involving a few to several dozen people. A more collective and organized violent attack, called *osu*, involves 100–1000 or more people. The Daasanach youths explain that they have two aims in going to war. The first is to raid the enemy’s livestock and keep their access to the pasturelands for their livelihood. The second is to kill members of enemy to prove their masculinity⁷.

³ Mkutu, *Guns and governance*.

⁴ Abbink, ‘Violence and culture’, p. 137.

⁵ Sagawa, ‘Automatic rifles’.

⁶ Raudzens, ‘War-winning weapons’, pp. 432-3.

⁷ Sagawa, ‘War experiences’.

Although the conflict among pastoral peoples seems to be ‘traditional’, one of the root causes of conflict is associated with state policy. For example, the British colonial government controlled livestock herding by local pastoralists around the border area, increasing the scarcity of pastures in the area. This policy caused an intensification of hostility between the Daasanach and the neighbouring peoples. After the Second World War, the Ethiopian government lost interest in this remote area and made few attempts to resolve their inter-ethnic conflicts. The Ethiopian government had not enforced a disarmament operation in the region from the mid-1960s to the mid-2000s.

The history of the proliferation of the rifle in the Daasanach can be classified into three periods⁸. The first period began after the conquest of the Ethiopian state in 1898. Single-loader rifles were introduced to the region by merchants and soldiers from the north. The second period began with the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1936. The Italian army trained the Daasanach to become a border defence corps against British-Kenya and supplied them with approximately a thousand rifles⁹. After the withdrawal of Italy in 1941, rifles left by the Italian army were circulated by local merchants. During the third period, the proliferation of automatic rifles (mainly the AK-47s and G3s) occurred in the late 1980s. The Daasanach acquired the rifles primarily by bartering with merchants, neighbouring peoples, and other Daasanach.

At around 15 years of age, a Daasanach boy conducts an initiation ceremony and enters into age-set. At this point, he is allowed to purchase his own rifle and go to the battlefield. In 2006, 48% of adult (initiated) males I interviewed (N=163) owned rifles and 87% of rifle owners had automatic rifles.

III

After the proliferation of the automatic rifle, larger scale battles occurred between the Daasanach and their neighbours. The relationships between the Daasanach and three neighbouring peoples, the Nyangatom, Turkana, and Gabra, changed after the 1980s. Due to the detailed history I presented in my other paper¹⁰, I only summarise the relationships between new arms and violence intensification or conflict frequency.

The Nyangatom are a northern neighbour of the Daasanach. Relations between them were mostly amicable from the 1940s to the 1960s. A chain of revenge was brought about by a larger conflict in 1972, when the Daasanach killed over 100 Nyangatom. During the 1970s, the Nyangatom were also involved in serious battles with other neighbouring peoples.

The situation changed to the Nyangatom’s advantage in the mid-1980s. The Nyangatom acquired automatic rifles from their allies, the Toposa, who live in the south-eastern Sudan (currently South Sudan)¹¹. They attacked neighbouring peoples one by one. From 1988–9, the Nyangatom and Toposa destroyed three Daasanach villages on the western side of the Omo river.

The most devastating attack on the Daasanach was against the village called Salain. The Nyangatom attacked the village before sunset and killed hundreds of Daasanach in just a few hours. In this battle, the Daasanach survivors observed that some Nyangatom continued to shoot at the dead bodies of the Daasanach, even after they ran out of bullets. It was also observed that after the battle, the Nyangatom moved to a nearby hill and shot their rifles

⁸ Sagawa, ‘Automatic rifles’.

⁹ Almagor, ‘Raiders and elders’.

¹⁰ Sagawa, ‘Automatic rifles’.

¹¹ Tornay, ‘More chances’.

into the sky and then ate the livestock meat that they raided from the Daasanach. This was unusual because a group of fighters who raid an enemy's livestock return to their village as soon as possible, fearing a counterattack from the enemy. That time, the Nyangatom and Toposa stayed near the village for several hours and displayed their superior strength of power to the Daasanach. The Daasanach recall this time as, 'The Nyangatom got drunk with Kalashnikovs'. Due to the of fear of the Nyangatom's fighting power, the Daasanach abandoned the land on the western side of the river and moved to the eastern side.

To defend themselves against the Nyangatom, the Daasanach demanded the local government to supply them with automatic rifles—but the request was refused. After this, the Daasanach heard that many AK47s were supplied in the Arbore land from the east. In 1991, after many adult males acquired automatic rifles, the Daasanach attacked Kibish, one of the biggest villages of the Nyangatom. Although the Daasanach did not achieve military victory in the battle, they established the fact that they could fight the Nyangatom as equals.

After this war, the Daasanach youths slowly moved to the western side of the river, which remained in no-man's land, and herded their livestock. The Nyangatom did not execute another well-organized attack until 2006. In the late 1990s, the Daasanach moved further north and started living together with the Nyangatom in Kibish.

The Turkana live in the western region of Lake Turkana. The Daasanach maintained a militarily superior position since the early twentieth century. This was partly attributed to the fact that they were able to acquire older-styled rifles from the Ethiopian region, as opposed to the Turkana of Kenya, where the circulation of firearms was strictly regulated by the colonial government. However, when the Ugandan regime under Idi Amin collapsed in 1979, the automatic rifles flooded into the Karimojong of Uganda, and the Turkana began acquiring automatic rifles from over the border.

When they were equally matched militarily, a large-scaled violent crash occurred in 2000. The Daasanach attacked a Turkana village named Kanamagur to avenge themselves against the Turkana. It is estimated that about 200 people were killed or wounded in both groups. At this battle, the Daasanach attacked the village with three military units from the left, right, and front before dawn. This had been their usual attack strategy. However, in this battle, large quantities of bullets from automatic rifles flew in every direction in the dark. The Daasanach not only killed livestock, but also accidentally shot and killed some of their own comrades.

This was a serious issue for the Daasanach because in their culture, killing another Daasanach is considered a mistake of the highest order. A Daasanach who kills another Daasanach must have a *nyogich*. The person who has a *nyogich* must engage in a purification ritual, otherwise the *nyogich* will infect other Daasanach. Even if the person performed the ritual, it is said that the person who has a *nyogich* will inevitably die after some years. Since it was not known who had accidentally killed the other Daasanach in the battlefield, those killers had not performed the purification ritual. This created widespread fear among the Daasanach that a *nyogich* would infect the whole community.

After this conflict, the young men discussed the unexpected result of the battle and the elders advised them of the present danger. Elders called the new rifles 'bad or dangerous rifle (*jiete dedewa*)' compared to the older-styled rifles and warned the young men to restrain themselves from using them. After a long discussion, the young men decided to change their attack strategy. Instead of invading the village before dawn, they would attack the enemy with small members after sunrise when the people and their livestock were

herding outside of the village. In an attack outside the village, the livestock would scatter, reducing the risk of shooting their own community members. Although small-scaled raids against the Turkana occurred after the Kanamagur's conflict, the number of dead and wounded was much less than in the conflict in 2000.

The Gabra are the south-eastern neighbours of the Daasanach. Since the colonial period, the Daasanach were armed with older-styled rifles, having attacked and defeated the Gabra. Unlike the Turkana, the Gabra living in Kenya could not get automatic rifles, because their territory was far from the Ugandan border. In March 1997, the Daasanach, armed with new rifles, attacked the village of Kokoy and killed more than 100 Gabra. In addition, the Daasanach killed Kenyan policemen a day after the fighting with the Gabra.

After this battle, the Kenyan government instituted a law designed to deter violent conflicts. If a member of one group killed a member of another group, his group had to pay 50 cattle to the other group in compensation. There had been no similar form of 'blood-price' between the Daasanach and neighbouring groups before the government established the law. It appears that the new law had an impact on the inter-group relationships because no large-scale battles occurred until 2006.

However, the risk of a conflict re-occurring still exists. In January 2006, approximately 150 members of the youngest age-set planned a large-scale attack against a Gabra village. The main reason for the planned attack was that the younger men were jealous of the older members who had battle experience, and they wanted to go to war to prove their masculinity. Before the attack was carried out, it was disclosed to the older members. The members of all age-sets hit the members of the youngest age-set with sticks and made them withdraw their plan. The Kenyan Daasanach have three generation-sets and each generation-set consists of five to eight age-sets. Their relationships are complex. In short, the interaction of the generational system and age system creates a complex system of opposition and cooperation among age-sets. Thus, it was unusual for all age-sets to cooperate with each other to regulate the activities of the youngest age-set.

Underlying these issues was a sense of crisis elder Daasanach men felt under the Kenyan government. The Daasanach living in Kenyan side are demographically and politically minority groups in their county. They believe that they have consistently been marginalized by the government, as compared to the Gabra in the same administrative zone. The Kenyan Daasanach indicated that, after the War in Kokoy, government pressure had increased. To prevent another oppressive intervention by the Kenyan government, the elder Daasanach men intensified their control of the activities of the youngest age-set, which otherwise would have provided a reason for the government to threaten their livelihoods.

IV

I showed the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations between the Daasanach and neighbouring groups. It is clear that violence on the battlefield has intensified since the proliferation of automatic rifles. However, inter-ethnic relations did not deteriorate into disorder. The sociologist Lewis Coser aptly described the situation of this area: 'By bringing about new situations, which are partly or totally undefined by rules and norms, conflict acts as a stimulus for the establishment of new rules and norms'¹². The Daasanach, who have been confronted with 'new situations' in the proliferation of automatic rifles, have attempted to institute 'new rules' to control the excessive use of violence.

¹² Coser, *The functions of social conflict*, p. 124.

Regarding the Nyangatom, the military factor, or their mutual balance of power, has mainly contributed to the control of excessive violence. In the relationship with the Turkana, the cultural and social factors, like the local concept *nyogich*, and the advice from the elders, has changed the strategy on the battlefield and decreased the scale and casualties of the conflict. In the relationship with the Gabra, the political factor, or external pressures from the Kenyan local government, has made elder members intensify their control of the youths and their violence. As previously mentioned, George Raudzens pointed out that the introduction of new arms ‘has been more obvious in its effects on the way people fight rather than on the outcomes of combat. New weapons have changed soldiers’ behavior’¹³. I would add that the introduction of new weapons has also changed community member’s attitudes toward ‘soldiers (youth in pastoral societies)’, and their new attitudes have managed the exercise of violence with new arms by ‘soldiers (youth)’.

Examining the relationships between firearms availability and violence, it is important to consider historical processes after the proliferation of new arms, social and cultural contexts involved, and people’s agency to control violence.

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¹³ Raudzens, ‘War-winning weapons’, pp. 432-3.