

Stock Theft and its Economic Impact on Rural Communities in South Africa.

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Stock theft in South Africa continues to remain a perennial problem, and is not a recent phenomenon. What has made the South African case unique is the fact that stock theft criminality has assumed an international dimension, given the fact that the scourge does not take place exclusively within the borders of South Africa, but affects neighbouring countries, especially the Kingdom of Lesotho. Cross-border stock raids have assumed devastating proportions in recent times. The consequences of stock theft are grave and devastating on the parties involved—perpetrators (stock thieves) as well as victims (stock farmers) who feature as major casualty in the situation. The paper argues that among all crimes, stock theft stands out conspicuously, given the fact that it won't only inflict bodily harm to the victim (stock farmers), but psychologically leaves a lasting memory of pain, penury and anguish on stock farmers, especially in rural communities. The paper concludes on the keynote that, despite the endeavours by the South African government to combat the alarming incidence of stock theft, the possibility of success remains a fantasy.

Introduction

The narratives of crime in South Africa echo throughout the capital cities and rural areas, though most of these narratives still focus on physical crimes on people. There is no doubt that such crimes are very important, but they do not define the terrain of criminal acts as a whole.

The focus on this aspect of crime peripherizes economic crime, especially in rural communities. While these crimes do not directly and immediately result in physical bodily harm, they affect people's self-esteem and compromise their economic capabilities. This article pushes the frontiers of analysis beyond crimes of physical bodily harm, to those that subject rural

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communities to prolonged poverty and economic dislocations that often last beyond a generation. It focuses on stock theft whose occurrence and consequences have been reported in many parts of the world. For instance, in 2012 villagers in Madagascar killed sixty cattle thieves in separate attacks in the Southern part of the island (Manu, Andu, Tarla, and Agharih, 2014). At the end of 2012 it was reported that the value of cattle stolen in South Africa was R43m, a figure that created a huge dent in the country's economy (Clack, 2013). Clearly, the economics of stock theft need some serious academic attention, especially in the present decades when rural poverty is rampant and rural economies are peripherized.

This article foregrounds the economic impact of stock theft in rural communities by reconceptualizing stock theft as a barbaric economic activity rather than a cultural practice embedded in the beliefs of a people. Stock theft is a business operating according to the capitalist ethos of profit maximization and accumulation, and some researchers have observed that there is a close relationship between the expansion of capitalist relations and stock theft (Molosiwa, 2007). Research conducted in the western states of the United States America has shown that, "increase in cattle crimes [is] linked to the slumping economy, soaring beef prices and when the market is extremely high, the bad boys come out" (Zuckman, 2011, p1). In rural communities' Stock theft is a lucrative business that has grown in recent years and has gradually become disastrous to human settlement, as seen in some parts of East Africa (Kaimba, Njehia & Guliye, 2011).

At the moment almost no research has been conducted on the occurrence and economic impact of stock theft in rural communities in South Africa like Maluti-Matatiele. This is preposterous especially because rural communities in this region have been subjected to this crime for several decades and its impact has undermined the attempts of community members to uplift themselves economically. Stock theft in the region has continued regardless of the efforts of the government to combat it. One of these measures was the establishment of The Stock Theft Unit (STU) as an auxiliary wing of the South African Police (SAP). This article aims at closing this gap in the literature and showing the dynamics behind stock theft and its economic effect on rural communities. To achieve this, data for this article was generated using semi-structured interviews within the qualitative case study research. This method was deemed to be the most appropriate, as the necessary information had to be collected from the rural dwellers of Maluti-Matatiele. Through purposive sampling combined with snowballing, most stock farmers because of their socio-economic backgrounds were interviewed. Open-ended questions were

used to get as much detail as possible. Therefore, the analysis contained in this article is anchored on the personal experiences of people as opposed to robust theoretical inquiry.

Livestock in the context of the rural economy of the Maluti-Matatiele region

Through research, historians and other scholars have revealed the centrality of animal stock in the rural economy of the northern Nguni groups. The importance and dominance of cattle in the economies of south Eastern parts of Africa was already well established by the middle of the 18th century (Reader, 1970). For instance, a Portuguese sailor who was shipwrecked off the Natal coast in 1593 and who travelled through the region to Delagoa Bay wrote:

These people are herdsmen and cultivators. Their main crop is millet which they grind between two stones or in wooden mortars to make flour. Their cattle are numerous, fat, tender, tasty, large, the pastures being very fertile. Their wealth consists mainly in their huge number of dehorned cows. They also subsist on cow's milk and on the butter which they make from it (Boxer, 1959, p.2).

Later, Dutch seamen who likewise survived a shipwreck on the Natal coast in the 1680s reported that "the country is exceedingly fertile, and incredibly populous, and full of cattle, whence it is that lions and other ravenous animals are not apt to attack men, as they find enough tame cattle to devour" (Thompson, 1990, p. 21).

The symbiotic relationship between people and domesticated livestock seems to have reached its apotheosis during the 1680s, furthering the progenitive capacity of both groups in favoured habitats where neither could have multiplied fast without the help of the other. Livestock and the concomitant growth in human numbers were responsible for the distribution and social organization of the Bantu-speaking groups to which the residents of Matatiele-Maluti belong. Highly stratified political systems evolved directly from the ecological requirements of livestock herding, with a strong correlation between political stratification and the relative size of herds and settlements. At its simplest level, grazing requirements and the mechanics of herd management implied that owners of large numbers of livestock would have access to most land, occupy the largest settlements and hold political authority over the greatest number of people. The Swazi, the Sotho, the Tswana, the Shona, the Ndebele, the Venda, the Xhosa, and the Zulu developed economies and political systems that were founded upon the wealth of cattle, but none could depend upon cattle alone. When colonialism began to circumvent cattle raids in neighbouring communities, the leaders, in pursuit of cattle accumulation, turned to raiding communities within the same polity. The value of cattle in a region like Maluti-

Matatiele goes beyond physical wealth to become a necessary resource—they are used for pulling ploughs when tilling the soil (Simelane, 2002). This was especially the case in the first decades of the 20th century before steel ploughs began to be widely used by the indigenous population in Southern Africa.

As a result of this long historic development, one of the central features of most rural homesteads in Maluti-Matatiele is the cattle byre/kraal. Cattle have continued to play an important part in many aspects of the spiritual and material life of the rural inhabitants in the region. Spiritually, cattle is used as sacrifice to the gods and as a way of communicating to the dead. Furthermore, it is used to pay bride price or *amalobolo* (bride wealth) when a lady's hand is sought for marriage. Through cattle, a man is able to accumulate more wives who eventually, together with their children, become an invaluable source of family labour. The custom of *ukulobola* has encouraged Swati men to consider their daughters primarily as a means of acquiring cattle, which are viewed as central to the economic security of rural homesteads.

The tendency to increase cattle numbers, even under adverse environmental conditions, is a characteristic feature of Maluti-Matatiele rural society. This has been so despite the fact that the country has serious problems of environmental degradation (Clack, 2013). It is widely believed in most rural areas of Southern Africa that cattle accumulation bestows economic security, prestige and status, and rural achievers are seen as those with large herds of cattle. Low, Kemp and Doran (1980) argue

that in other Nguni tribes “cattle are a store of wealth or a savings account from which withdrawals are made only for special social or ceremonial occasions or for emergency needs such as payments for education.” Holman, Rivas, Urbina, Rivera, Giraldo, Guzman, Martinez, Medina and Ramirez (2005, p. 20) add that:

The role of livestock keeping revolve around storing wealth, contributing to food and nutritional security, providing draught power, transportation and manure, and serving traditional social functions. In some situations, the ‘livestock ladder’ may allow the poor to progress from modest livestock holdings, such as a few poultry, to acquiring sheep and goats or pigs, or even cattle. Livestock production provides a constant flow of income and reduces the vulnerability of agricultural production.

This is also true in the Maluti-Matatiele region, where cattle is seen as a source of wealth. It is not surprising to find that most migrants to the mines invest part of their earnings in cattle (Khoabane & Black 2009). This tendency is clearly demonstrated by the experience of the

Maluti-Matatiele region, where evidence suggests that the level of cattle accumulation has risen as a result of male labour migration to the mines. Cattle accumulation is clearly one of the priorities in decisions regarding capital investment among migrant workers. The importance of cattle in the Maluti-Matatiele region has several implications of a social and economic nature. It means that the fabric of rural Swazi society is interwoven with the issue of livestock ownership. It also means cattle ownership plays a crucial role in the economic security of rural homesteads. Any negative development in cattle ownership or in the general availability of cattle is bound to lead to important social and economic disruptions.

The Occurrence of stock theft in the Maluti-Matatiele region

Police reports indicate that stock theft is part of daily life in the Maluti-Matatiele region, as numerous cattle are reported stolen daily, not including those not reported. Some of the reasons for failure to report cases of stock theft could be ignorance and fear on the part of local stock farmers. There is a general feeling that if all the cases were reported the district would come up worse than other areas in South Africa. Statistical information gathered from the police indicates that in 2012 there was no month without reported cases of stock theft (See Table 1), with 165 cases of stock theft report. In 2013 the number increased to 204, but dropped to 179 in 2014 and again to 165 in 2015. The table also indicates a high level of efficiency on the part of the police in dealing with the cases and again the monthly variations come out as in some months all the cases are dealt with. However some of the pending cases are the ones police had difficulty in investigating and may be struck off the roll. It should be noted that dealing with the cases does not mean that the stock was recovered but only that they went through the official legal processes.

Though the number of stock have been reducing since 2014, the manner in which the crime is committed has moved from local peasant approaches to highly organized strategies with regard to, with social and economic mechanisms. Khoabane, and Black (2012) testified to this by stating that stock theft has become more organized and violent. Stock theft syndicates transport animals from one village to another, and eventually to local butcheries and market outlets in South Africa. A high ranking police officer of the Stock Theft Unit (STU) in Maluti-Matatiele region indicated that most stolen stock are transported to market outlets in far distant cities and towns such as Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban, Pietermaritzburg and Richards Bay. The aim is to conceal, or make virtually impossible, the tracking of these stolen stock.

There are two main kinds of stock thieves in the Maluti-Matatiele region. Although there is no statistical proof, a large number of the thieves are local. These are people who have in-depth knowledge about the households of the area and the security conditions of each household.

The targets of these thieves are usually vulnerable households, especially those which have absentee male heads. It must be noted, however, that there is no household that is safe from the thieves. The next set of thieves comes from across the border in Lesotho. The cross-border stock theft incidents experienced by many villages have grown significantly over the years, with catastrophic consequences to life and property (Appiah, 2009). The 'Mail and Guardian' newspaper (1988: 18-23) described the occurrence of cross-border stock theft in Maluti-Matatiele region in glowing terms when it stated:

They come over the mountains from Lesotho on skis every full moon, invisible in their snowsuits, lethal with their AK-47s. An experienced band of five, on a good night in the virtually perennial snow that erases their trail in seconds, they will drive off at least 100 head of stock. Now the farmers may not be so keen after the week's border disaster in which three men in a strong Mount Fletcher cross-border recovery party died in a hail of semi-automatic rifle fire on entering Lesotho. Only two years ago, hundreds of blanket-clad Basotho poured over the hills, plundering, burning and looting. Police say 15 Transkei villages in the Maluti-Matatiele district died and those Basotho raiders who were captured, as eventually revealed in court, were killed in cold blood by frustrated police.

The above depiction shows the extent of cross-border raids taking place in the Maluti-Matatiele region. According to some participants, from time to time there is collaboration between the two sets of thieves, and this is because thieves from Lesotho are always well informed as to which homesteads are vulnerable and this can only happen with information from within the communities. The combination of the two sets of thieves complicates the issue of investigating the crimes as it is difficult to work across the border. Some of the stock are taken forcibly from the owners as was the case in Mapfontein, where 76 head of cattle were taken by force from the herd-boys in December, 2015.

Vectors of stock theft in the Maluti-Matatiele region

In order to understand the dynamics of stock theft in the Maluti-Matatiele region, there is a need to investigate the vectors of the practice. An analysis of the practice is meant to dispel the traditional discourse dominated by colonial historians who postulated that stock theft was

a product of an innate disposition to thievery in African people. This section shows that local circumstances combined with economic imperatives were the main drivers or vectors of stock theft in the Maluti-Matatiele region. It should be appreciated that no single vector can account for stock theft in the region but a combination of several dynamics

The geographical terrain of the Maluti-Matatiele region makes it ideal for stock thieves. The rugged mountain terrain and the deeply incised valleys of the Drakensberg have served as protective haven for stock thieves. It is very difficult to identify suspicious individuals and also very difficult and dangerous to track stolen stock. This gives local thieves who have good knowledge of the terrain a decisive advantage over the police whenever they try to track reported cases of theft. For example, the region boasts “fifty-seven mountain passes known for the smuggling of marijuana and livestock” (Nedbank, 2001, p. 1). The deep gorges stretching between the towering mountainous ranges are exploited by stock thieves for the concealment of stolen stock during the day. The stock is driven across the mountainous ranges during the night to different destinations where they are readily exchanged for guns, cash or dagga, depending on the type of animal that has been stolen (Nedbank, 2001, p.7).

The establishment of certain economic enterprises has had a negative effect of promoting stock theft. This is the case with the proliferation of funeral parlours whose business feeds the upsurge in stock theft. One of the participants pointing to this noted that;

Businessmen who run local funeral parlours have a close working relationship with stock theft syndicates. This symbiotic relationship ensures that business thrives through acquiring stolen stock bought at very low prices from the thieves. Stock theft syndicates are regular suppliers of animals for slaughter whose meat is used in funerals. This arises from the fact that in the Maluti-Matatiele, funeral undertakers do not only provide coffins for bereaved families, but also stock like cattle, sheep, and in some instances, goats. The animals are often slaughtered in preparation for delicacies served at such social functions, for visitors, sympathizers and well-wishers, who come from far and wide to mourn with the bereaved family members and grace the occasion.

In addition to funeral parlours, butcheries have also grown to be very strong driver for stock theft. In most instances the issue revolves around maximizing profits by achieving high levels of accumulation. While this is the cornerstone of the capitalist economic system, there is no check that the process of accumulation is pursued ethically. It has been estimated that in most

instances butchery owners make more than 100% profit out of stolen stock. Police evidence has shown that some of the animals going to local butcheries are killed in the forests and transported to butcheries as meat. Another participant further added that;

As you see, the increase of stock theft has moved simultaneously with a corresponding increase in butchery houses and funeral parlours. Both the butchery houses and funeral parlours depend largely on stolen stock to drive their business enterprises. Crucially important, they serve as ready market for stolen stock. Without a market readily available from these butcheries and funeral parlours, stock theft will vanish from our localities, or its impact will be brought to a minimum level.

The issue of stock theft being driven by capitalist enterprises is widespread and much bigger than discussed above. It is part of the larger process of the expansion of capitalist enterprises and their accompanying logic of material or financial accumulation. More significantly, it feeds on the larger problem of corruption that the South African Government and other African governments are finding difficult to control. Corruption informs the process of accumulation strongly and rural communities are not immune.

One of the strong vectors of stock theft in the Maluti-Matatiele region is its proximity to the South African-Lesotho border. Respondents in the research pointed out that the district's geographical location has contributed to the escalation in stock theft in the region. Villages situated close to the border are particularly vulnerable and are perpetually potential victims of stock theft. Research has shown that the border is porous, allowing easy movement of all types of people, including criminals (Crush, Jeeves, & Yudelman, 1992). The nature of the border facilitates cross-border raids and makes these communities open to stock theft. Research carried out by Kynoch and Ulicki (2001, p. 30) has shown the extent of this problem: "villages close to the border typically find themselves in a difficult situation for they are targeted by both Basotho and South African stock thieves. Since 1990, 85% of stock-owners in the border villages have lost animals to thieves, as compared to 47% from non-border villages." The reality is that the further a village is from the border, the lower its vulnerability to stock theft. Simelane, (2005) argues that research in other Southern African countries has led to the same conclusion, indicating that any innovative measures to combat stock theft should concentrate on communities along the border.

Evidence indicates that developments in the South African economy have a close relationship to levels of stock theft in the Maluti-Matatiele region. This is especially the case with sporadic job-shedding and retrenchments in those sectors in which people from the rural areas dominate. For example, the performance of the South African mining industry has impacted on the rural economy in Maluti-Matatiele, consequently raising the levels of stock theft. Since 1990, the mining industry has been experiencing structural problems accompanied by sporadic job-shedding, and retrenchment of workers. Bhorat and Kambour (2006) avers that “employment in the coal mines drastically fell from a high of 101,705 employees in 1985 to 55, 219 by 1997. For gold and uranium mining, the decline was from 526,839 to 241,352 employees over the same period, while for diamond and other minerals employment declined from 199,572 in 1990 to 136,543 in 1997. It has been revealed that over 100 000 mine workers have been retrenched over the past decade, with a substantial financial loss of over R50 million in incomes for local economies (Bhorat & Kambour 2006).

The above statements demonstrate that employment levels in the mining industry have been on the decline for some time now with critical outcomes, especially in rural communities. Most areas in Southern Africa have historically been sending rural migrants as labour for the mines and consequently, job-shedding in the mining industry has had a significant effect on the economies of rural communities. Retrenchment of mine workers and the pressure to meet the bare necessities of life such as food, shelter, and clothing have shot unemployment levels to new heights in local communities in the Maluti-Matatiele region.

Socio-economic impacts of stock theft in the Maluti-Matatiele region

The importance of livestock in traditional African society cannot be overstated. Given the rural background of the district with its traditional customary practices and physical geographical terrain, livestock keeping is paramount in most rural communities of the region. The prestige of the African stock farmer is measured not only in monetary terms but also numerically in stock size, especially in cattle. The possession of cattle commands both social and economic status in the traditional community. The more stock an African farmer owns, the greater the level of social prestige he carries in a rural community. Stock theft has therefore depressed the social positions and status of many men in the Maluti-Matatiele region. This has been a major social dislocation whose impact has been felt in the general social rubric of the region. This is because they felt that their masculinity was challenged, leaving them with no material base for

justifying their authority in the household. For many men things are falling apart because the seat of male dominance is being weakened by stock theft.

Another important social impact of stock theft is the generation of conflict. Violence has been used by all parties and stakeholders involved in stock theft whether they are victims or perpetrators. Violent action by perpetrators of stock theft related-crimes in most instances is reciprocated with violence. This is either in the process of protecting their stock or attempting to recover stolen stock. For most communities mob justice and jungle justice synergistically become the preferred option. They are allowed to dictate outcome of events without recourse to officially prescribed legal procedures and processes. They take the law into their own hands and mercilessly deal with suspects of stock theft or perpetrators caught in the act. Testifying to this, one of the participants indicated that “a young man of about twenty–five years suspected of spearheading a campaign in favour of a stock theft syndicate. He was caught in one of the localities, given a severe beating, and he died two days later before the matter was reported to the police.” Culprits suspected of stock theft face the might of vigilante justice. Beating and, in extreme cases, murder are preferred methods of redress. Highlighting mob justice one participant highlighted that:

One man died about a week ago. He was suspected of leading a stock theft syndicate, specialising in random cross-border raids of our stock. He suffered grievous bodily harm, as a result of heavy beating. He died in our hands. His body was dumped in that shallow grave. He was merely given a puppet burial. The matter ended there. Since then calm once again has returned to our community. We know this will not last for long.

Shepherds and community residents who courageously challenge or intercept suspected drivers of stolen stock frequently end up either killed or maimed permanently. Stock thieves themselves most often prepare themselves for this by carrying weapons ranging from knives to riffles. The crux of the matter is that a cauldron of violence and counter violence is woven through the social dynamics surrounding stock theft. The level of violence has reached epidemic proportions in rural communities in the Maluti-Matatiele region (Khoabane, and Black, 2012). Manu, et al (2014, p. 183) add to this by arguing that “stock theft has affected relations within villages on a number of levels. The level of mistrust among villagers has reportedly increased. This mistrust is not targeted at any neighbour in particular, but manifests itself in underlying tensions among villagers.”

The tendency of communities to take the law into their own hands is motivated by the fact that rural communities in the region have lost faith in the state police. Allegations of low police

commitment to combat stock theft are widespread. The general feeling is that members of the Stock Theft Units (STUs) own large herds of cattle accumulated through illicit means. Local farmers believe that stock impounded from suspected stock thieves ultimately find their way into farms owned by some policemen in the district, while some believe some STU officers maintain close ties with stock thieves. One participant demonstrated the negative feelings against the police by pointing out that, “the police unit spends too much time in the village *shebeen* drinking and engaging in love affairs with the local village women.” Another local added that “instead of STUs crossing the border into Lesotho in search of our lost stock, rather they tend to engage in a desperate search for Basotho women and end up having fun with them in the border towns like Qachas Nek.” The results of stock theft on the local economy and farmers in the district is quite devastating, with some local farmers trapped in bankruptcy, unemployment, poverty and some experiencing death (Kabelo, 2015). The testimony from one of the participants pointed to this when he stated that;

I emerged as a successful stock farmer, supplying meat and milk to my neighbours and the local communities around me. I was producing 300 litters of milk a day. I have been out of work for the past 5 years, when all my stock, about 300 of them including lame ones and calves were stolen. I suffered from nervous breakdown, but I recovered. I now depend on government grants, as old age pensioner. I am now left with my farm equipment like the cans and buckets for milking, scale for measurements, plastic bottles for selling milk and several others. My milk parlour for pasteurization, built at high cost is left empty. At the moment I am nothing, I am nobody.

Through the help of the local police he managed to recover some, but not enough to enable him to sustain his business. Although there were differences in intensity, a large number of cattle farmers in the region could relate with this experience.

Conclusion

The present state of research indicates that stock theft has not yet been integrated into the academic mainstream as an important issue that merits research. This is in spite of the fact that its occurrence has been observed worldwide and that it can seriously affect the livelihoods of the victims. This neglect arises partly from the perception that stock theft is a casual phenomenon reminiscent of the sporadic raids of previous centuries. However, this article encourages a re-conceptualization that considers stock theft as a business that is undertaken for profit realization while at the same time being an economic hazard to the victims. This

approach is crucial in understanding economic relations in rural areas, particularly the developments that undermine people's capabilities of improving the quality of their lives.

An analysis of rural economies in South Africa shows that stock is intertwined with the progress and sustenance of rural communities. The economic value of stock, especially cattle, has been highlighted in the different historical periods of the development of these societies. The most obvious implication of this is that any dislocation in stock ownership affects the economic fortunes of the homestead and the society at large. It is on the strength of such reality that stock theft should be recognized as an economic burden to rural communities everywhere in South Africa, and particularly among pastoralists.

The article has shown that the Maluti-Matatiele region is one of the areas in South Africa which has experienced numerous incidences of stock theft. Insight from participants indicated that the practice has been going on for decades and the perpetrators have formed themselves into organized syndicates that operate throughout the region. Some stock thieves are from within the borders of South Africa, while others are from across the border in Lesotho. The respondents in the research argued that the stock theft syndicates are organized in a cross-border format through the dissemination of information about characteristics of households and their vulnerabilities. Consequently, it is the rural communities that are closest to the border that are most vulnerable.

In this article, several vectors of stock theft have been identified and evidence indicates that the majority of them are of an economic nature. They range from dynamics in the rural economies themselves to changes in other economic sectors at a national level. For example, it has shown how a rural economy in which labour migrancy to the mines plays an important role can be dislocated by job shedding in the mining industry. While it closes channels of employment for young people, it offloads those who have been employed back into the rural areas, creating a huge employment deficit. There is good reason to conclude that some of them attempt to sustain themselves through stock theft.

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