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The Traditional Integrated Ways of Conflict Resolution between the Luo-Maasai Communities, Kenya

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Abstract:

This paper examines traditional integrated ways of conflict resolution between the Luo-Maasai (LM) communities in Kenya. The study was conducted in Ogwedhi-Sigawa, the border between the Luo-Maasai communities of Migori and Narok Counties, Kenya. It outlines how the Luo Traditional Religious Model to Conflict Resolution (LTRMCR) and Maasai Traditional Religious Model to Conflict Resolution (MTRMCR) integrates to resolve conflicts between the two communities. The discussion was guided by the conceptual framework on integrated Luo-Maasai traditional religious model to conflict resolution (ILMTRMCR). The study adopted a descriptive design and used purposive sampling to select the respondents. The data was analyzed qualitatively (Kombo and Tomp, 2013). The collection of the data was done using questions, group discussion, and oral interviews. The study shows how the key independent variables (LTRMCR and MTRMCR) interact to form an integrated LM model to conflict resolution, the ILMTRMCR.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Integrated Conflict Resolution. Luo-Maasai, Ogwedhi-Sigawa

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the traditional integrated ways of resolving LM conflict by examining similarities between LM traditional models to conflict resolution. The conflict has been in existence between the two communities for many years. They have individually attempted to involve their cultural traditions in exclusion of each other. The conflict between the two communities is dated to have been experienced from 1970s. When it erupted people were killed, businesses and property destroyed, and mistrust became a key problem between the two communities. Oral and formal reports show that the years 1972, 1979, 1982, 2002, and 2012 conflict took place between these two communities (Ayindo, 2001). The Kenya Mennonite Church (KMC) studied this conflict and attributed it to scarcity of resources and lack of education enlightenment. Therefore, they started an integrated school to be shared by the LM communities that was divided into lower and upper primary, with the lower located on Maasai land and upper on Luo land. They also started a demonstration agricultural farm project where the LM communities would learn new ways of farming which included animal husbandry as well. This has never addressed the conflict. The study discovered five basic shared religious and philosophical ideas that emerge between the two communities that need to interact positively towards resolving this intercommunity conflict include similarities and differences, sharing of LM border council of elders, involvement of traditional religious leaders, LM marriage, traditional spiritual conflict resolution, cross border trade and activities, covenant making and reconciliation.

1.1. The Institution of Council of Elders

Eldership is a highly respected position in nearly all African communities. An elder in this sense refer to an aged member of the community who has attained such qualification by the virtue of age and successfully going through all the community rites of passage. As senior members of the community, they are expected to be custodians of ethical values that they are highly expected to practice and teach younger members. Elders among the LM communities are pillars of the community in all matters regarding leadership and governance, ethics and religion. Most of the affairs of the LM communities are thus governed by a committee of such senior members, referred to as council of elders. To a wider extent, the concept of LM eldership also incorporate the departed members of community (family), known as the living dead and ancestors. They are treated as senior most elders based on the belief that they have the ability to interact with and influence both the physical and the unseen worlds (Grinder, Lubkemann & Steiner, 2010; Mbiti, 2015).

Although age is key determinant in LM eldership, it is not an automatic qualification. One has to earn this respected position. The process of attaining eldership incorporate rituals of confirmation involving the existing elders and the spirit world. A person has to show patriotism to community, absolute respect to their culture and be of unquestioned character. Marriage, with special regard to polygamy is one of the requirements (Wachege, 1992).

The Luo elders' qualifications include being a respected person in the community, wealthy and able to feed visitors and family. He must be full of wisdom and understanding in decision making. A Luo elder must also have the approval of traditional mystical powers known as *Jwogi*. These mystical powers are believed to enable them foresee hidden truths and make accurate and sound judgments in conflicting issues.

Since the Luo believe that true leadership begins at home, an elder must have a wife (wives) and be a good manager of his extended family. They are always members and representatives of a particular clan within the community. They are persons who are driven by a desire to take lead in Luo cultural and traditional justice system beginning with the family, clan and the entire community. Elders are expected to be lovers of peace, and loyal to taboos and customs of the community.

The Maasai elders' qualification include having been a Moran and being a graduate into adulthood. They come from different specific age groups. The elders' historical background in conflict management among age mates is always a point of reference. They are expected to be logical communicators and able to unite warring people together. As senior members of community, they have a duty to teach and mentor the younger members in cultural, political and religious matters. They are expected to be hospitable and not discriminative. They come from specific families that are gifted in leadership and conflict resolution. They must live uprightly and love truth, justice and peace.

The Maasai elders come from age mate leaders known as *Olaiguenani* (chief). The *Olaiguenani* is so powerful than the administration chiefs of the locations. He has a council known as *Ermut Olaiguenani* who is the key decision maker of the age groups. All the age groups have assistant chief known as *Olkiropi*. The age set has another leader *Olotunowho* who acts as their spokesperson. The traditional structures of the Maasai people restrict membership of elders to men. It is because of cultural belief that women cannot keep secrets and conflict involve lots of confidential issues.

The study discovered that LM elders to some extent are of the opinion that traditional conflict resolution is founded on the sovereignty of their socio-cultural settings. This indicates that when a person is in conflict, the family, clan and community also go through the same trouble (Shorter, 1985). Thus, it is the community that is hurt (wounded) by unresolved conflicts. According to LM peoples', conflict resolution is the healing of communal wound and restoration of social order and harmony (Glauckeman, 1965). Social co-existence is the root to conflict resolution and management. The aim of LM traditional conflict resolution is to reconstruct the broken wounds of the individual with God and community which include the living dead, ancestors, and nature. The reconciliation has potential power to heal wounded trust and ailing emotions by addressing hatred that leads to recurring conflict in the community.

From both communities, conflict resolution involves mediation, truth finding, and acknowledgement of wrong done, and building trust. This part discusses council of elders, realization of Justice and reconciliation. It involves local actors known as council of elders who are the legal decision-making machinery. The council manages and resolves conflicts within or between communities. The institution of the council of elders often resolve certain conflicts without involving the state-run judicial systems. This is based on the perception that conflict occur within the family, clan, and community where they live and can be managed within their cultural contexts (Tarimo, and Manwelo, 2008)

The LM elders play a major role in their effort to promote peace and harmony within their communities. They are the traditional ethical professionals in the community. They have a task to teach, guide and counsel community members on moral values. They understand peace as harmonious living in a community which involves the visible and the invisible worlds. The elders are believed to be close to and answerable to the living dead and ancestors who wisely guide the people in the community. They hold significant positions in the community of which they involve the living and ancestors in all community issues in order to avert conflict with them (Mbiti, 2015; Kasomo, 2010; Katola, 2003).

1.2. Traditional Religious Leaders

Mbiti (2015) calls such person's religious specialists. They are individuals that hold special knowledge and powers in religious matters. They can communicate easily with the spirits and act as quick links between the visible and the invisible world. Although such powers are often hereditary, they can also be imparted through training or certain rituals. They include medicine men, rain makers, diviners, seers, mediums, ritual elders and priests. An individual could also operate in multiples of such offices to address contextual needs of individual or community (Mbiti 2010).

The study established that the LM traditional religious leaders at times engage in spiritual tasks to address conflicts that threaten peace and security of their communities. The study revealed that such conflicts affect individual, family, clan, community, and inter-community relationships of the Luo-Maasai peoples. The informants from both divide affirmed that religious leaders prophesy and foresee a looming conflict and advice their communities on the way forward. Guided by the divine powers, they are able to identify causes and characters behind given conflicts. They are instrumental in addressing emotions and influencing change of attitude and behavior of the conflicted parties. They also use their divine gifts to preside over forgiveness and reconciliation between the conflicted parties at family, clan, community and intercommunity levels (Mbiti, 2015; Kasomo, 2010).

The study further discovered that traditional religious leaders are tasked by the Luo-Maasai communities to preside over rituals and prayers in reconciliation forums. In such occasions, they create awareness of reformation and restoration of conscience of those who have been involved in conflict. The study confirmed that religious specialist utilizes their powers to re-integrate conflicted persons, families, and neighbors into a reconciled community. They also work as part of council of elders and are involved in investigation of the causes of conflict.

1.3. The Customary Marriage

Customary marriage refers to marriage relationship celebrated and lived among the African people in accordance to the rules and customs of the community or communities to which the parties belong (Otieno 2016). Ronolick (2004) observed that marriage is a universal institution that is found in all human societies whether secular or religious. However, African customary marriage is uniquely religious and communal. Magesa (1997) asserted that African marriage is a sacred institution that is endowed by the gift of procreation. For Mugambi (2004), it is a *rite of passage* that is as compulsory as other rites. Mbiti (2015) further notes that African marriage is a covenant between the two communities involved, represented in the marrying couples.

Based on its strong communal and religious tenets, an inter-community marriage is perceived as a binding force that brings together the two communities to interact and treat one another as relatives. The LM inter-community marriage should thus occur naturally as the two communities interact on the shared borders. It should be encouraged as a diplomatic strategy to peace building. It should be used to create diplomatic relations between the warring communities as marriage is always treated with respect. It strengthens the bonds between the communities and will create foundation for interaction among the Luo-Maasai communities. It also builds mutual working and living relationship that could foster a path towards lasting peace. Both communities believe that marriage leads to the expansion of blood relations and it is natural not to fight your brother or sister, father or son.

Intercommunity marriages suddenly alter the nature of relationships between the communities involved. It makes a community to treat the other as one family in African context (in-laws) instead of potential enemies. The LM peoples consider women in such relationships as ambassadors of peace and reconciliation for their communities. Furthermore, the fear that such women can reveal war secrets to their home clan creates fear for war and commitment to address conflicts peacefully.

1.4. The Traditional Spiritual Conflict Resolution

African communities believe that the universe is naturally occupied by invisible forces referred to as mystical powers. It is also believed that certain individuals, especially religious specialists have the ability to tap, control and use these forces. Mystical powers are neither good nor bad, but can be used to achieve either ends. Elders or religious leaders often use mystical powers for good purpose while witches use them to cause harm (Mbiti, 2010).

The LM communities believe that mystical powers can follow up pronounced words of curses. They believe that elders and religious leaders are close to God and the ancestors. They thus possess divine ability to pronounce words of curses or blessings that the spirits follow up to execute on the living. Curses can as well be reversed by traditional medicine men and soothsayers through invoking them in the name of God or ancestors. This is done with the aim of reversing the perceived harm to an offender in a conflict. Curses are reversed or removed by performing necessary rituals within the cultural parameters (Augsburger, 1992; Wasonga, 2009).

The Luo-Maasai traditional mystical conflict resolution involves services of traditional healers, diviners, and herbalists. As a link between the living and spirits, they play a paramount task in conflict resolution at the family, clan, and community levels. This is done through rituals involving herbs, animals, beer taking, birds and water sacrifices. Rituals are used as a means of cleansing a convicted offender to reverse a community curse and to reconcile an offender with the community.

The two communities fear curses pronounced by their elders. Hence, a threat of curse can be used to warn individuals, families, and community members to avoid getting into conflict before consulting the council of elders. The principles behind curse is that they are only effective if a person is cursed by their own community. It is therefore the task of elders from a specific community to pronounce or withdraw a curse upon their members as a measure to control or solve conflicts.

1.5. The Cross-Border Trade and Open Activities

The study discovered that LM peoples concurred with each other on the necessity to carry out business a cross the border of the two communities as a way of strengthening the bond between them. This can be done by forming a co-operative society within the border and open more branches in the interior parts of the two communities. In the modern generation women can as well start a table banking that incorporates both communities. They can start an inter-communal sport such as *mbao (ajua in Luo)*. Since there are cultural, social, and philosophical differences although they share the same area it is prudent to start a cross border young people social activities that will make them socialize together that will lead to sharing characters of activities such as drama.

1.6. The Covenant Making and Reconciliation

The traditional covenant making unites persons, family, community or the two warring communities. African covenant making is both physical and spiritual. It has religious impact in both emotional and spiritual status of the people. It is instrumental in reconciliation after conflict (Kasomo, 2008).

The study revealed that LM peoples make covenants during reconciliation or truth investigation rituals. The accuser may swear an oath during reconciliation or confirmation of the conflict. The study affirmed that a cross the divide they swear oath against a claim in the name of God or living dead in order to prove innocence. This is done ritualistically and prayerfully under the leadership of the traditional spiritual leaders (medicine persons). The opposing parties must swear the oath presided by the religious leaders in the presence of council of the elders. Informants disclosed that accepting to take an oath is an indication of being innocent but failure to respond to an oath is perceived to be admission of guilt. The status of the curse can only be reversed by traditional medicine men (herbalist) who is entitled to perform healing rituals and prayers that settle down the conflict. This is crowned up by sharing a meal together as a sign of healing and reconstruction of the relationship. The picture below is an illustration of a covenant making and reconciliation ritual on the road that commonly used by the people.



Figure 1: A ram sacrificed on the road by elders during a covenant making ritual

2. The Differences of LM Traditional Models

Despite the vast similarities and shared religious values between the two communities, the study further revealed a number of divergences that make each of them peculiar in their own cultural setting. To begin with, the Maasai have a strong and established age set system that is absent among the Luo. The age set refers to a group of men belonging to the same age bracket and were circumcised together. Each of these age sets have their own council, led by a chief leader who is appointed by them. The position of a chief is hereditary from the family of leaders and each member is expected to offer him a symbolic beard representing legal and mystical delegation of authority. The beards are then coiled into a chain (necklace) that the leader must wear during official functions to legitimate the transaction. The age set system is further arranged in a hierarchical order depending on age and seniority. The Maasai council of elders is thus formed by representatives from the senior age sets.

The age set system makes Maasai community very articulate in handling conflicts. Since most of the internal conflicts occur within the age sets, they are mostly handled by the age set leaders. The council of elders is thus relieved from minor conflicts. As community experts, council elders are reserved to manage referral cases and intercommunity conflicts.

The Luo on the hand sometimes practice the sacrificial of a warrior in order to make peace. In this case, a medicine man would use charms that would lead to death of one warrior in the course of war. They believe that the death of that one warrior would bring them victory and realize peace. This would work under the influence of a special mystical power for victory called *bilo* (the mystical charm meant to influence power of war that leads to victory in the case of conflict). But mostly Luo people use mystical powers to influence conflict resolution without death.

3. Weakness of integrated LM Model

The effects of curses are effective only within the individual community. Thus, the use of curse must be done within the community to their own members who are behind the conflicts after several consultative attempts within the leaderships of the communities. Cross border trade and open activities to some extent is done within the communities. Therefore, to some extent each community do not trust each fully rather than their own. The co-operative societies are only functional within the communities but not a cross border. Peace and reconciliation to be realized trade and co-operative societies should be established to the extent of recruiting membership from both communities.

4. Conclusion

In view of insufficiencies of the individual traditional religious conflict resolution of the LM models, this study formulated conceptual framework model, the Integrated Luo-Maasai Traditional Religious Model to Conflict Resolution ILMTRMCR. The LM model represents a paradigm shift of the two concepts and variables for Luo-Maasai harmonious relations in Ogwedhi-Sigawa. The integrated model has four areas:

A: Luo traditional religious model to conflict resolution (LTRMCR) formed *Independent Variable*

B: Maasai traditional religious model to conflict resolution (MTRMCR) formed *Independent Variable*

C: Similarities and differences of the LM traditional religious models are the shared traditional practices, values, and differences.

D: Integrated Luo-Maasai traditional religious model to Conflict Resolution (ILMTRMCR) formed the integrated conflict resolution.

It borrowed traditional practices, values and virtues on conflict resolutions from both communities and integrated them to form the ILMTRMCR as indicated in the conceptual. The model is based on the shared respective LM traditional models. The localized traditional religious conflict resolution principles are orally learned and applied whenever there is conflict within the individual communities.

The study established that LM peoples have shared traditional religious principles for conflict resolution and management the ILMTRMCR. Informants a cross the two-divide share on the necessity to establish LM: border council of elders; Traditional religious leaders; customary cross border marriages; traditional spiritual conflict resolution; cross border trade and open activities; covenant making and reconciliation. The study revealed that LM peoples are exposed to similar process of traditional conflict resolution include guilt acknowledgment responsibility; repentance; asking for forgiveness; compensation payment (fine) as a commitment to the offense; and reconciliation with the victim's family, community through ritual and prayers led by religious (spiritual) leaders.

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