

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Origin and Understanding of Conflict in Chagga Culture

Rose Uiso

Assistant Lecturer, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Dodoma University, Tanzania

### **Abstract:**

*The discussion centered on the origin and understanding of conflict in Chagga culture. Chagga is ethnic group located in the northern part of Tanzania. The discussion highlights on the reasons for conflict and how conflict is employed in Chagga culture before, during and after the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The role played by the local chiefs in perpetuating conflict as well as the introduction of German colonial rule in Kilimanjaro region. The influence technology has and the introduction of new religion in Chagga culture. The traditional Chagga religion as part of African Traditional Religion (ATR) centering on rituals, beliefs and practices that characterize the Chagga community and introduce the part that Christian belief has played in destroying the traditional Chagga religion.*

**Keywords:** conflict, Chagga, culture, religion, Mangi, HIV/AIDS

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Conflict in Chagga Culture before 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Chagga is a tribe from the northern Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania that is divided into various subclasses with different clans, dialects and geographical locations. This tribe has a history of conflict. In Chagga culture, conflict means misunderstanding that involves a number of individuals, clans or chiefs. Also, the term conflict can mean fighting with the intention to measure the power of the Mangi (Local Chief of Chagga people) and the strongest of his nyaghanyi (soldiers). Ma-mangi were treated like kings; they had power over the people, their properties and all their resources. Chiefs were often regarded as having supernatural powers.

Before 19<sup>th</sup> century, there have been conflicts that led to fighting between Chagga and Kenyan Maasai tribes over cattle. It was following these battles that the conflict between tribes evolved. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, conflict was classified according to the way it was used. It was mainly used as quarrels over land (which at the time and in this area was a very scarce resource), cattle, and power over territories.

Many chiefs when wanting to gain control over big territories and populations in order to benefit from them also used the threat of conflict. The threat of rivalry was also frequently used by Ma-mangi (chiefs) to obtain cattle. The principal food was meat, and if people were not willing to provide it to the chief voluntarily, he would use violence to obtain the resources by force. The threat of being assaulted by a mangi and his nyanghanyi endangered the livelihood of those who were not capable of defending their land, so in most cases they would comply with the demands.

#### 2. Conflict in Chagga Culture during and After 19<sup>th</sup> Century

The nature of conflict started to change when the German colonialists arrived in the Chagga land. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Germans arrived and met with the local chiefs. Sina of Kibosho Chiefdom was the strongest in the Kilimanjaro region after bringing other chiefs to heel by warfare. However, Rindi of Moshi successfully persuaded the Germans that he was the supreme chief of Chaggaland (Kimambo, 1968). The Germans declared hostilities on any chief who refused to sign the proposed treaties and to hand over power. They collaborated with some chiefs, equipped the local nyaghanyi with modern weapons, especially guns, to fight the enemy. They ordered them to assassinate leaders and imprison local people, ruin crops and steal grain.

Today the Chagga people live in a culture very much influenced by science and technology, which has changed their perspective on conflict. During 19<sup>th</sup> century, conflict involves technologically advanced fighting on an international level, rather than the small inter-tribal battles it previously referred to. The use of computer technology and sophisticated weapons has caused a shift of nature of conflict from a local to a global perspective. In the contemporary world, the conflict refers to the occupation of vast areas, killing masses of people, and causing lots of suffering.

In the current generation of the late 20<sup>th</sup> to early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the perceptiveness of the conflict oscillates between past generation's stories and the strong influence of media, creating a rift between traditional local perspectives and the wider

perspective of modern Chagga society. There is clear indication that the advancement of technology with new inventions within the Chagga civilization expands the understanding and origin of conflict in Chagga culture.

According to Macionis (1992), the term 'culture' refers to the 'values, behavior, beliefs and material objects together which form a people's way of life' (p. 35). Macionis focused on the individuals' character that makes a member of the society, complying with the societal laws and rules for the survival of the individual and society as whole. In Chagga culture the positive values such as hard work and respect are appreciated; the individual's behavior acts as an indication of the people's culture.

Chagga Culture refers to behaviors, beliefs, language, wealth, ideas, practices and attitudes that contribute to the fabric of the society and its balance. As Macionis stated, in Chagga culture both material and nonmaterial culture contribute significantly to the meaning of the term conflict. There are many types of conflicts in Chagga culture that take different forms, often not involving physical fights.

People engage in different cultural behaviors and actions that can become the cause of conflict to overcome cultural difficulties) or (losing of cultural prestige). For example, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Kilimanjaro region in Tanzania faced a rapid population increase that marked the unstoppable migration of people outside Chagga culture looking for business opportunities, land for settlement, education and better life, this movement brought conflict in to Chagga culture.

The spread of pandemic diseases like HIV/AIDS (Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) in 1980's & 90's has been the result of a conflict in Chagga culture. During the migration, with little sex education and reluctant use of condoms by younger generations, HIV/AIDS killed scores of young people who temporarily or permanently reside outside of the region who think that sex is a pleasure associated with wealth. Therefore, HIV/AIDS became the primary cause of death among adults in the country and decimated the most productive age group leaving behind misery, suffering and poverty (Ogunbodede, 2004). The destruction of the health of young adults by diseases such as AIDS left a state of sorrow and bitterness in the society. The older generation with little or no knowledge about the disease, believed that HIV/AIDS is/was a misfortune that attacked and killed young and health generation.

According to the norms and values of Chagga people prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to a small extent in the modern world, people believed that marriage between cultures was unacceptable and was believed to destroy the cultural way of living when a stranger was welcomed into the family. This often caused conflict. It is/was prohibited for boys due to the patriarchal system in Chagga culture. Inter-marriage between ethnic groups is assumed to be a threat to one group's culture and tradition.

Tong (2010) asserted that,

Marriage seems to take on a primary role in ethnic identification, occupying both a stabilizing position. Marriage in Chinese community is seen as one of the sites of expression for Chinese ethnic identity; as one of the ways in which Chinese traditions and culture is upheld. There is high degree of resistance to intermarriage within the Vietnamese. Inter-marriage is viewed as "mixing", therefore contributing to a form of contamination to the purity of one's chineseness (p. 25).

Together with differences in marriages, older generation believed that material ownership should not be shared outside Chagga culture, another reason of conflict in Chagga culture is over material ownership. Chagga people fight to create new business ideas, to have control over land, money, and to achieve a high standard of living. Chagga culture prepares the individuals for hard work, respect, beliefs and generosity within the family and society. According to Pietila (2007) the Chagga people are reputed to be especially ambitious, entrepreneurial, and modern people in Tanzania and East Africa (p. 3-4). Chagga men and women are prominent for their fighting ideology, struggle to start small, medium, and big business within the country.

In Chagga culture, food and cash crop production is main activity for the survival of the society. Kilimanjaro region is known for coffee production but in the long term, reality has seen production decline. There have been changes in agricultural practices; there has been an agricultural focus on banana production to develop it as a cash crop inside and outside Kilimanjaro region. This is not without its challenges though, for example, increasingly unpredictable weather is making it hard for growers to plan harvests, and the world market inflation rises bring a lot of worries and conflict to the mind of people. The conflict caused by food production issues has been apparent since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until today. The struggles facing society to avoid this conflict reminds me of the processes involved in peacekeeping operations during and after warfare.

### 3. Influence of Technology on Chagga Culture

Chagga culture is dynamic. Technology can be seen as the main influence of social change, and also the main tool of destruction of the cultural way of living. Mass media and tourism have had a significant impact. For example, Kichagga have been influenced by the media and tourism, which promote other languages like Swahili, English and French, often forgetting about the cultural language heritage. This presents challenges for grandparents who are increasingly isolated because they find it difficult to communicate with their grandchildren. This is not to say that, we should be adverse to change, but to highlight the fact that, we should be aware of the divide that technology could create between generations potentially threatening family networks, and group bonding. The influence of technology and the superiority of one language over another are likely to be another cause of argument.

#### 4. Religion and Cultural Practices

Celebrations in Chagga culture are carried out through rituals and practices that involve family members. Most cultural practices involve animal slaughter; the blood is used for prayers and Mbege (local beer made from banana and sorghum) is usually taken as a drink. The introduction of new religion to the Chagga people triggered a conflict in Chagga culture especially when people were converted to the western Christianity, which teaches people how to believe and behave. The Christian religious teachings are against all the rituals and cultural practices of traditional Chagga culture. These religious differences are causing differences in interests between generations. Most of the Chagga people are Christians and still practice the cultural rituals on key occasions; when a person dies, the birth of a baby and marriage ceremonies.

I was born into a Christian and Chagga family. The community in which I was brought up was made up of many Christians and a few Muslims. I attend Sunday school in a Christian mission that preached Christian beliefs and practices though; I have strong ties with traditional Chagga beliefs. My parents are Christians but still practicing the traditional tribal religious beliefs, rituals and practices that were believed to keep the family safe and healthy. I participated in a family ritual when I was teenager; we slaughtered a goat and made pombe (local beer made from banana and sorghum). The elders poured blood and pombe on the ground slowly whilst reciting prayers for forgiveness and giving thanks to the gods and ancestors who were named during the prayers. After the ritual, all family members had to share the kisusa (a hot soup from boiled meat mixed with blood) and pombe to show appreciation and full participation. I remember questioning my religious practices, which religious belief is right or wrong?

According to Macionis (1992) Religion is a social institution involving beliefs and practices based on a conception of the sacred (p.355). As for Chagga people, they have their own traditional religious beliefs, practices, rituals and God/gods. In Chagga culture, god is known as Ruwa, who is the creator, giver and the punisher of wrong doers. Chagga religion also believes in supernatural powers like mmbari (sun) and the dead spirits who are believed to still be present and respected as the members of the family. Chagga traditional religion can be defined as the religious traditional basing on life experience, natural environment and supernatural powers.

Conflict in traditional Chagga religion can be seen when the societal norms, values, beliefs, rituals and practices are violated by the insiders or outsiders and when the community fights as a result. Chagga religion is part of the African Traditional Religion where witchcraft, herbal, treatments, divination and sorcery are believed to help and save society during difficulties. Examples of difficulties could be; prolonged drought, low harvests, and high mortality rates. These specialists (witchdoctors, diviners, sorcerers, and herbalists) are used to provide solutions, medicines and predict the future.

Traditionally, witchcraft and sorcery are valued if they are controlled, but on the other hand, are thought to harm and cause problems in the community if misused. Magesa (1997) in his writings about the West African community, stated that "witches, human beings and sorcerers can cause disastrous harm if not controlled" (p.27). In Chagga community to some extent, these specialists are used to cause harm for a range of reasons. If witches and sorcerers harm and cause killings, then it can cause conflict in the communities. One example of this is the killing of Albinos in the Lake Regions of Tanzania between 2007 and 2010. Albinos were targeted for their body parts; it was believed that if body parts were used in some traditional medicines it would bring wealth. As a result, they harm and kill people. Lloyd explained the conflict of fear and harm caused by witchcraft and sorcery.

Lloyd (1967) stated that,

In the Cornell survey at Abeokuta community {Nigeria} a half of those suffering certain or probable mental disorder believed that they were bewitched; nearly a quarter, that sorcery was being used against them...witchcraft however, is feared not only by those who fail but perhaps even more so by the successful (p. 254).

Rituals of sacrifice in Chagga religion have purposes, and are very important in occasions like births, marriages, circumcision, and death. During a ritual of sacrifice, an animal represents a symbol of sharing food with the spirits. Also, when the social order is violated and causes harm in the community (through occasions such as illness, disappearance of individuals and death), the leaders and elders decide how the situation should be dealt with or overcome. Magesa (1997) stated that "...when ancestors are unhappy about the attitude of their descendants, they make this known and often employ painful means against those who misbehave" (p.80) the disbeliefs and misbehavior of individuals is likely to create conflict in Chagga religion. To avoid this painful conflict, rituals must be carried out to please the ancestors and as the way of solving the problem and maintaining the natural relationships with spirits.

The introduction of new beliefs like Christianity changed traditional beliefs and practices. The changes were made through misinterpretations of the traditional Chagga religion and it was those new beliefs that lead to misunderstandings between Chagga communities and the Christian missionaries. Desai (1962) when discussing the situation in Central Africa community referring to David Livingstone, stated very clearly from individuals' perspective; "to be plain with you...we should like you much better if you traded with us and then went away, without forever boring us with preaching that word of God of yours" (p.2). The Kwena community in Central Africa did not like the idea of new beliefs and practices, as they were very happy with their tribal life. They valued new relationships with outsiders but did not appreciate the interference in their natural belief.

The introduction of Christian beliefs that created slavery and colonialism did not please the Chagga communities, Magesa (1997) highlighted the reliance of communities through periods of slavery and colonialism; "they (the community) have preserved for people their identity as Africans through such massive crises as slavery and colonialism" (p. 6) despite the

influx of missionaries trying to persuade them. New beliefs introduced into traditional Chagga religion were intended to win people over and make colonialism easy through violating the traditional ways of life. This is one example of how conflicts of religious interests can lead to disagreement within traditional tribal religions.

## 5. Conclusion

The discussion of conflict focused on Chagga point of view. The evolution of conflict and its origin was covered before during and after 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through my reading around the subject, it is apparent that conflict evolution within Chagga culture is an untouched subject academically. Due to this, all of my information has come from my own personal experiences and knowledge together with information gathered from interviews that I conducted with a range of Chagga people.

Conflict in Chagga community evidently does have a pattern of evolution that can be followed. Here, through my reading and interviews I have been able to scratch the surface of the source and evolution of misunderstanding from a Chagga tribe perspective.

I have stated what culture means by adopting the definition of the sociology scholar Macionis. Based on his definition, I have discussed how each of the elements that make up 'culture' (values, beliefs, behaviors and material objects) can present an idea of conflict within Chagga culture and influence the meaning of the word.

There have been major occasions and events, which have contributed to cultural shifts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which shocked the Chagga culture. These are; migration, HIV/AIDS, and food production. How the values and norms in Chagga culture can be seen to result in conflict and how differences between Chagga and other cultures influence differences in views on key cultural traditions such as intercultural marriage and the material ownership. Technology could cause a difference of cultural opinion between generations and how religious beliefs, health issues can lead to divergence in Chagga culture.

It is therefore extremely difficult to identify one single origin and understanding of the conflict in Chagga culture. Conflict in Chagga culture can encompass a variety of meanings, most of which do not follow the widely held interpretation that, conflict refers to physical fighting and which often has a negative connotation. Conflict in Chagga culture could refer to; jealousy (through inter-tribal competition for jobs, education or a labor force), a difference in knowledge in or access to technology between generations (created through the advancement of technology), the loss of lives (through health issues), differences in tribal norms and acceptance thereof between different tribes, or worry or uncertainty (crop harvest unpredictability)

Conflict in traditional Chagga religion focusing on the beliefs in witchcraft, sorcery, and rituals that when misused destruct the societal order. A survey carried out in Abeokuta community, Nigeria, showed that witchcraft and sorcery can affect the community negatively and cause psychological conflict particularly amongst the successful individuals. The introduction of Christianity had/still has influences on Chagga religion, and how it is often a reason for misunderstanding. Christian values opposed traditional Chagga religion practices and beliefs.

## 6. References

- i. Desai, R. (1962). *Christianity in Africa as Seen by Africans*: Denver: Alan Swallow.
- ii. Kimambo, N. (1968). *The Political History of the Pare People to 1900*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House.
- iii. Lloyd, P.C. (1967). *Africa in Social Change: Changing Traditional Societies in the Modern World*. United States: Penguin Books Inc.
- iv. Macionis, J. (1992). *Society the Basics: (6<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc.
- v. Magesa, L. (1997). *African Religion: The moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. New York: Orbis Books, Marry knoll.
- vi. Ogunbodede, E. O. (2004). HIV/AIDS Situation in Africa. *International Dental Journal* 54, 352–360.
- vii. Pietila, T. (2007). *Gossip, Markets and Gender: How dialogue constructs Moral Value in Post-Socialist Kilimanjaro*. USA: University of Wisconsin Press.
- viii. Tong, C.K. (2010). *Identity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia: Racializing Chineseness*. New York: Springer