

# The Role of Abamura/Morans in Cross-Border Conflicts among the Maasai and the Kuria of Kenya, 1920-1963

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## ABSTRACT

It is a historical fact that most Kenyan communities are haunted by actual or potential ethnic conflicts. Kenya comprises of many ethnic communities that are religiously shaped by their cherished cultures. These are the cultures which influenced the peoples' behavior and conduct. It is therefore true that most Kenyan communities were directly or indirectly affected by inter-ethnic community crisis. Inter-ethnic conflicts that were so prevalent among the Kenyan communities concerned cultural issues though culture was not uniform in all communities. This study analyzes the contribution of culture in the frequent conflicts between the Maasai and Kuria communities from 1920 to 1963. Conflict theory was employed to examine the conflicts and was reinforced by structural functionalism theory in the analysis. The assumption in this study was that culture was specifically a contributory factor in regional conflicts and therefore needed a local examination. The study relied on secondary and primary data such as those from the existing written sources and from the affected peoples of Kuria and Trans-Mara region. Purposive sampling was used to reach out to the informants. The research was guided by the specific research questions and objectives which included establishing the influence of rites of passage, Moranism/Abamura and religious beliefs on cross-border conflict between the Maasai and Kuria from 1920 to 1963. This research was confined to cultural issues between 1920 - 1963. Scarce data, hostile respondents, vast land, sparse population and poor means of transport were some of the limitations encountered. The targeted groups of people for

interview included the District Commissioners, head teachers of primary and secondary schools, church leaders, chiefs, clan elders, Border Peace Committee members, traditional healers, Morans/Abamura, Agricultural officers and ordinary residents. This research is descriptive and was based at Kegonga Division of Kuria and Masurura Division of Trans-Mara. Data collected was analyzed and the validity of the research examined together with its reliability. The backgrounds of the Kuria and Maasai were also studied to examine the progressive development of cross-border conflict between them since 1920 to 1963 and how culture had been a hindrance to positive adoption of modern lifestyle. Data collected from the field of study was analyzed, discussed, presented and interpreted within the set objectives of the study. The study also examined the aspects of the cultures of both the Maasai and Kuria which were seen to perpetuate cross-border conflict. Such cultural aspects include circumcision, marriage, Moranism/Abamura and traditional religion. Lastly, the summary of the findings, recommendations, suggestions for further research and contribution to literature are presented. The findings of the study revealed that the rites of passage, Moranism/Abamura and religious beliefs contributed to cross-border conflicts between the Maasai and Kuria.

## INTRODUCTION

By 1920, the Maasai newly initiated warriors were culturally forced to demonstrate that they possessed the courage and discipline to protect and defend the community. To accomplish this they needed to kill enemies, capture enemies, seize the enemy's weapons, and drive off the enemy's cattle. To validate their worth as warriors, they had to attack in the open. This was the pride with which the Maasai conducted cattle raids from their neighbors. However, there emerged a cultural shift when European colonial government was established

in Kenya. New trends in life were introduced mainly on land entitlement and cultural interference.

Onkuro (OI, 2010) notes that among the Kuria, when successful raiders returned home, they were greeted by joyous ululating women bearing baskets of *obukima* (ugali) and *obosare* (a non-alcoholic millet drink). Even after the establishment of the British colonial government, the Kuria intensified cross-border cattle raids more especially after the 1920s. The cultural aspect such as dowry payment using stolen cows was too difficult to phase out from among the Kuria because it was still evident in the early 1960s.

It was against the conflict background between the Kuria and Maasai communities that the colonial governments moved swiftly in 1950 to physically survey the border line and erect beacons. Each beacon was assigned to a local person for its security and survival. Archival sources reveal the extent to which cross-border conflict had reached. More controversy was brewing between the Kuria and Maasai over a mission school that was built at Ikerege in 1949 (Ikerege Mission School) and Komotobo mission near Kehancha which were at the borderline. In August 1949 a fierce cross-border conflict erupted between the Maasai and the Kuria which lasted six months and claimed several lives and destroyed property. (KNA/DC/NKU/3/1/20 (1949). According to (Kusiro, 2000) each community laid claim to the school thus prompting the colonial government to initiate physical land demarcation by erecting beacons to ease the tensions between the two communities. This was among the many efforts by the colonial government to solve cross-border conflicts between the Maasai and Kuria.

### **Abamura and Cross-Border Conflicts**

Abamura were a set of young men among the Kuria community who had gone through the rite of circumcision and therefore qualified into a given age set. They were the young men that society entrusted with security and general protection against external aggression to the community. Once admitted into an age set, they stayed in it until death. Admission into this cadre of *Abamura* group would start from about 18 years onwards and that was to be after circumcision. At this age, the *Abamura* would marry and rise up a family. It was from this *Abamura* that *Abagambi* (leaders) emerged. The *Abamura* were a dreaded group of young men whom nobody would dare ridicule, (Daniel Masero, OI, 2010). *Abamura*(warriors) qualified as young men and warriors after being circumcised, and therefore a new age set developed. Over a period of time, all the boys who had reached puberty were circumcised and incorporated into the newest age set. Circumcised young boys became junior warriors, a traditional period that was associated with the establishment of *Manyattas*, for the purpose of protecting the community and increase community cattle holding.

Courage in fighting was one of the most admired qualities and a test of manhood among *Abamura* of the Kuria. Apart from its glory, war also brought booty in the form of cattle to the Kuria peoples. *Abamura* were often called upon at times of need. Livestock raiding continued to be a prudent activity in Masurura Division before colonialism and even after colonialism. Characteristics of *Abamura* were very important in making cross-border cattle raids successful. The Kuria society expected the *Abamura* to display courage and warrior hood through cross-border cattle raids. Alongside this, matters of security among the Kuria and the Maasai were left to the Morans and *Abamura*. All young men (*Abamura*) were expected to be of potency in defense and security of the borders as well as cross-border cattle raids to increase cattle holdings of the community. Consequently therefore, the Morans and *Abamura* were expected to constantly increase their expertise in cross-border raids in order to increase their cattle holdings, (Marwa2002). The young men therefore took it upon themselves as an obligation to raid in order to meet the community expectations.

At the same time, the *Abamura* of the Kuria also underwent rigorous warrior training during seclusion after circumcision. The *Abamura* did not stay long in seclusion like the Maasai but the period took eight weeks within which the *Abagambi* (Abakuria men of charisma, insight and power to persuade others) presided over the education offered during that period. Traditions and norms of the community were given to the initiates. The *Abamura* were given education that was a reflection of what the society expected of them after seclusion. It included ability to defend the community, increase cattle holdings amongst them in readiness for marriage and even, display exemplary courage, (Mujuma, OI, 2010). This form of education that was designed for only the *Abamura* was intended to impart courage and a tradition through which cross-border raiding would be viewed positively at all times. After the seclusion training, *Abamura* were expected to display practically

what they had been trained on and this was done through engagement in daring cross-border cattle raids, something that perpetuated inter-ethnic conflicts for many years. It is also an idea that is fully depicted in the greed verses grievance theory

Daniel Masero (OI, 2010), and Nkanai ole Saole(OI, 2010), agreed that the legitimacy with which cattle was raided from the neighboring communities and the accepted perception that it was only through cross-border cattle raiding that young Morans and Abamura would increase their cattle possession to meet future expectations, increased and allowed this cultural tendency to continue. Whenever there were cross-border cattle raiding, the raiders would equally share the proceeds with the aged and the community leaders. The herds of cattle raided would be shared equally without bias amongst the *Abamura* together with the old and retired warriors. The support that was given to the warriors alongside the blessings by the elders motivated the warriors to continuously engage in cross-border cattle raids.

KNA/PC/NZA/3/15/2 (1952-1954), confirmed that after the Second World War, home-made guns had been a menace as far as cross-border conflicts were concerned. The ease, with which these guns were obtained from the neighboring country of Tanzania and the manufacture of the home made guns among the Kuria community, complicated the peacemaking efforts thus perpetuating the conflicts further. The guns gave the Kuria the courage and confidence with which they raided the neighboring communities for cattle. Archival sources show that the ease, with which guns and other home-made weapons were accessed, worsened the cross-border conflicts.

Archival sources indicate that the love the Kuria had for cattle made them to ignore their personal hygiene in that they both shared cattle dens with animals,(KNA/PC/NZA/3/24/2/61930).It was upon this disregard of hygiene that made the Kuria suffer typhoid in 1928. Lack of proper sanitation among the Kuria led to chronic diseases that warranted the August 1928 mass treatment. It was concluded that the poor housing, poor latrine habits, the eating of raw meat, lack of enough food (malnutrition) and clean water largely contributed to the outbreak of typhoid. The Maasai took advantage of the situation and swiftly raided the Kuria and took a large herd of cattle. The Kuria had been very weakened by the loss of the Abamura to typhoid and malaria upon which the Maasai took advantage.

As late as 1951, the Kuria easily accessed guns which they commonly employed in raiding of cattle. Some of the guns would be acquired from colonial soldiers by ambushing them and confiscating arms mainly by the Kuria. The proliferation of firearms in the region meant that conflicts had become much more deadly and complicated. Home-made guns that were much more affordable than the manufactured guns made weapons even more accessible,(KNA/PC/NZA/3/15/21952-54). And this was the main reason why the Kuria were always perceived to be the aggressors over the atrocities that afflicted the Maasai as concerned cattle theft in the 1950s. The Maasai engaged in cattle raids at night while the Kuria raided during the day because of the courage obtained from the possession of very powerful weapons against the Maasai's traditional weapons consisting of spears, arrows and machetes. However, they were also very good in night time raids. These were the trainings that the Abamura underwent during seclusion period in order for them to master the usage of the weapons and use them in times of need more especially during stock raids. Therefore this was part of the graduation for the Abamura into the next stage of life.

### **Morans and Cross-Border Conflicts**

Morans were the young men who had attained the age of circumcision at age of about 17 years. After circumcision, the young men were isolated into a "*manyatta*", a Maasai healing residence for young circumcised men, in which they were taught and given the community values, rules and expectations. They went through rigorous training on community traditions and norms. Cultural education was offered by the elderly and mainly the *Laibon*. The importance of cattle in the Maasai community was emphasized during this time and while in the *manyatta*. After seclusion period, the Morans joined an age grade which comprised of warriors who were, like the Kuria, entrusted with the security of the community apart from the ability to increase their cattle, (Erickson Maiyo, OI, 2010).

Erickson Maiyo (OI, 2010) indicates that it was during seclusion after circumcision that the Morans were also

trained on matters of cattle raiding, the discipline during the raids, respect of the other cadres of age groups, disciplined use of traditional weapons, roles of every leader in Maasai land, how to use their traditional weapons, the meaning and importance of cattle in their midst. The Morans were also prepared on their expectation in society which included their role in defending the community and enlarge their cattle holding.

According to (SunkuliKiyapiOI, 2010), cross-border raids were conducted with pride and confidence because they were seen to have the community's blessings and whoever failed to take part in the exercise was viewed with scorn and disregard by the rest of the community members. Therefore, it was the responsibility of every young circumcised Moran to take part in the cultural cross-border cattle raids because this was their maiden responsibility in Moranhood and thereafter.

The long period that the Maasai initiates took in the *manyatta* in order to heal and the nature of education that was given to them during that time enhanced cross-border conflicts. The MaasaiMorans received a special form of education which prepared them for what was expected of them in the future. This form of education was offered by respected elders in the Maasai community who were popularly known as the *Laibons*. They were rich in experience and knowledge of societal norms and values, (Koyati, OI, 2010). Some of the teachings given during seclusion were courage, preparations for marriage, and the Moran's role in increasing cattle holding, security matters, man hood, societal expectations, and the concept that all cows were God given to the Maasai.

Nkanarr ole Keiwa, (OI 2010), argues that one would do anything no matter how dangerous it would be provided the end result was to increase cattle possession among the communities. The assertion was also supported by MunikoMarubo (OI, 2010). The data collected showed that many of the Maasai and Kuria lives highly depended on matters related to cattle possession.

## CONCLUSIONS

The institution of the *Abamura* and Morans among the Kuria and Maasai, made cross-border peace unattainable. Cultural inclinations greatly hampered peace along the border between Maasai and Kuria. The pride with which cross-border cattle raids were conducted by both the Kuria and Maasai, and the kind of welcome the successful raiders received back home by women made them to conduct yet another cross-border raid in order to perpetuate the honor and respect given to them by fellow villagers. The concept that wealth was a qualification for Moranism and *Abamura* encouraged greed which fueled the continued cross-border raids in order to replenish their herds of cattle. This conveniently called for the greed versus grievance theory to justify and move away from the structural-functionalism and show how conflict was inevitable in society. More so, all that was gotten from the conflicts benefited all in society because human society is a collection of competing interest groups and individuals and each with their own motives and expectations, (Heald, 2000).

The fact that the main source of livelihood for the Kuria and Maasai was pastoralism, cattle raiding was not something that was to end very fast. Compounded with the proliferation of small arms, cross-border conflicts became even more complicated. This brings forth the greed and grievance theory which emphasizes tensions and divisions which result from the unequally distributed resources.

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