

# Rites of Passage and Cross-Border Conflict among the Maasai and Kuria of Kenya, 1920-1963

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the contribution of the rites of passage 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 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.

## INTRODUCTION

Rites of passage involved transitional activities which included circumcision, hair shaving, marriage and setting up of age sets which went with ceremonies at puberty and which promoted the affected individuals from one stage in life to another. Such rites were undertaken at birth, circumcision, marriage and death. These were segments among both the Maasai and Kuria. The rites of passage for the two communities of Kuria and Maasai carried very major aspects that contributed to conflict. Each community's groups of men and women of certain ages undertook specific cultural activities which were believed to enable them move to the next level of life. These undertakings had a profound connection to cross-border conflict between the Maasai and Kuria. These rites were undertaken to empower a person to fit and fully settle in society with confidence and sense of responsibility. Such elevations to various stages in life were very important to the respective communities such that without them, one would be considered as incomplete in society.

There were many initiations that concerned especially males among the Maasai and the Kuria communities. Initiation in Maasai culture was much complicated than anything else. Although there were many ceremonies in the Maasai society, including *Emurata* (circumcision), *Enkiama* (marriage), *Eunoto* (warrior ceremony) *Enkangoo-ukiri* (meat-eating ceremony), and *Orngesher* (junior elder ceremony). Throughout these ceremonies, boys were encouraged to master and know how to care for and manage livestock. Among the Kuria on the other hand, circumcision and marriage were the major initiations that graduated individuals from one stage of life to another. Essentially therefore, these were cultural practices within the two communities which had to work and operate systematically for the orderly functioning of society.

### Birth as a Rite

Omuga (2010) opines that among the Kuria community, women were believed to be innately dependent on men and are constricted in their abilities, and above all, responsible for bringing forth life. Child bearing was viewed with a lot of sacredness because it was through this that the society was assured of continuity. Every married couple of good health was expected to bear children in order to ensure continuity of the community. Once a child was born among the Kuria community, celebrations accompanied it, whereby, animals were slaughtered. People ate and drank during this time with lots of dance and ululations. The animals slaughtered were obtained from raids conducted across the neighboring communities. This practice made cross-border cattle raids to be more rampant in order to maintain constant supply of the required cattle for such ceremonies.

Parasayip ole Koyati (OI, 2010) asserts that in all matters associated with birth and infancy; there was an element of providence expressed as the prerogative of God. This observation, it was interesting to note, extended to all living things because it was felt that all things on earth were determined by God. Pregnancy was a closely regulated period with a sequence of minor ceremonies among the Maasai. Cows were slaughtered for the pregnant woman to eat and drink blood in order to build the unborn infant and give the infant the taste of legitimacy of cattle holding in society and also build up the mother's strength over a period of about six weeks in readiness for child bearing. On this occasion, her food was rigidly prescribed in order for the infant to build the characters expected by the society. This was the process of constructing a real Maasai woman or man. Such anticipations together with the other later in life preparations were springboards upon which cross-border conflicts emanated because upon birth, a child will grow and mature with confidence.

According to SaitotiBorrok (OI, 2010), during the months that followed the childbirth, the mother and infant depended on rituals. These rituals included the avoidance of washing with water. Their hair was to be *Olmas* (Ritual hair that must not be cut). Mother and baby were also virtually confined to their village; others were dangerous. The child and mother underwent various rituals in order to enable the newly born baby to be fully associated to the community culturally. The rituals were undertaken with the characteristic slaughtering of cows and goats to crown the ceremony. The animals that were slaughtered during these periods belonged to the community and in case there was lack of such animals; they were expected to be obtained from the neighboring communities through cattle raids. Consequently, cross-border cattle raids were intensified with the cultural undertakings with regard to births among the Maasai community.

### **Circumcision and Conflicts among the Maasai.**

The young men among the Maasai were grouped into 'age-sets' as culture demanded while undergoing their rites of passage. Circumcision was the most vital kind of initiation rite of passage in Maasai culture. Young men were eager to go through it; because it meant that they had taken the first step in becoming warriors. They took responsibilities for the security of their territory and were to go out and conduct cattle raids from the neighboring communities, (Nathan 2004). The Maasai practiced circumcision as a rite of passage from one stage of life to another. The experience in circumcision was that which involved emotional and physical pain and required a boy to pass the test of manhood; to show courage, endurance, and the ability to control one's emotions. Circumcision elevated an individual from childhood to adulthood. In order for the boy to be initiated, it was a must that he proved himself by showing courage and bravery through being ready for the cultural cut. Once circumcised, the Maasai considered one a man, a warrior, and a protector of his community. The community value bravery in their warriors and circumcision was a boy's first way to prove his courage even in the face of severe pain.

According to Payerr ole Ntutu (OI,2010), the circumcised young men had to show signs of grown up men, by carrying heavy spears, herding large herds of livestock and undertaking daring cross-border raids for cattle. For the Maasai, this ceremony was attended to by the entire village. Once circumcised, the young men became members of a warrior class-Moran and lived away from their village with other cohorts of warriors. During seclusion, the boys live in *Emanyatta*. After ten years, the young Maasai men take part in the *eunoto* ceremony which marked the transition from junior warrior to senior warrior and graduate into marriage. This practice was conducted with joy, celebrations and pride. From 1928 onwards cultural circumcision among the Maasai took a different direction because the Europeans saw the rite that accompanied the cherished cultural practices to be primitive and un-Godly, Bentsen (1989).

Internet sources indicated that the expectations that came with circumcision had a bearing on how conflict erupted between the Maasai and Kuria communities, ([Htt://crawjurd.dk/Africa/Kenya-timeline.htm/Maasai](http://crawjurd.dk/Africa/Kenya-timeline.htm/Maasai)). A young Maasai man, who was of circumcision age, had to exhibit certain abilities in order to qualify for the rite. The young men had to conduct successful cattle raids against the neighboring communities.

Nkasiogi (2000) avers that after circumcision among the Maasai, the young men had to stay far away from the rest of the villagers in a *manyatta* for a period of three months to heal. This was the period of seclusion and during this time the initiates were subjected to some cultural education. The initiates were taught the

community values, norms, traditions, and expectations. The initiates were expected to be brave, courageous, show endurance and exhibit warrior skills that befitted their new status. During seclusion, the initiates were also taught about traditional approaches in the treatment of animals, traditional approaches in the treatment of humans, herbal knowledge for motivating psyche and courage, traditional ethics, general animal care among many others. The Maasai warriors were taught warrior skills, how to demonstrate heroism, and all that went with Moranism among the Maasai. They were taught about the qualities most praised in them, such as courage, loyalty to age mates, defense to elders and cleanliness. The courage praised was the courage that was displayed during cattle raids. This was an undertaking that was conducted openly and proudly in the 1920s, (Bentsen 1989). Cattle raiding was more serious during seclusion period because every circumcised young man had a duty to conduct successful cross-border raids in order to show that he was man enough and capable of protecting and defending the community apart from enhancing the community cattle holding.

According to archival sources, the D. C. Narok and D. C. Nyanza consulted the Trans-Mara and Kuria elders regarding the constant cattle raiding across their shared border (KNA/PC/NKR/11/2/5/7, 1952). This showed how cross-border raids had become a menace. And as a response by the District Commissioner, Narok dated 20<sup>th</sup> November 1952 to the D. C., Nyanza concerning the widespread cattle rustling between the Maasai and Kuria during seclusion periods, it was indicated that he had spoken with Maasai elders concerned but anticipated the full details from the Maasai and Kuria council meeting. This was testimony enough to show that cattle rustling had worsened more especially at seclusion periods. An unknown number of cows had been stolen from the Kuria purportedly by the Maasai. This was corroborated by the letter written by the District Commissioner of Narok to his counterpart in Nyanza concerning the worsening cross-border conflict between the Maasai and the Kuria, (KNA/DC/NRK/3/2/2, 1952).

Church mission stations had been established in Maasai land by the 1930s. The catholic mission in particular, had established mission stations in Maasai land at Kilgoris and another one at Orlogessaille, (KNA/DC/NRK/6/2/3 1929). The two mission stations attempted to convert people to Christianity by preaching the gospel to them and teaching them the advantages of education. These efforts to some extent assisted in shifting the cultural thinking of the Maasai though initially very difficult to convert. Christianity begun to grow from this humble beginning and by 1963, Kilgoris mission had 402 Christian converts. Regardless of these efforts by the Christian missionaries, many of the Maasai people stuck to their cultural undertakings though not as rigorous as it was before the coming of the Christian missionaries.

The traditional culture was now a mixed up culture: the culture that would not be fully understood by its initial custodians. Indicators of such confusion were seen in situations where those who embraced Christianity accepted circumcision of only boys as taught by the missionaries. They also accommodated circumcision in hospitals thus going against the societal expectations. The young and the ones converted to Christianity begun to accommodate western education and culture. With colonialism, the community was made up of mixed adherents, those who followed traditional religion and those converted to Christianity, (Ruel 1991).

### **Circumcision and Cross-Border Conflicts among the Kuria**

Kabisai Manu (OI, 2010), indicates that for the Kuria, circumcision was a central institution in the lives of the people. As a rite of passage, it constituted the transition from childhood to adulthood, marking the changed status of an individual and his family, with the concomitant changes in roles, responsibilities, control and power. It marked the identity of an individual within the Kuria community and defined a person in relation to the extended family, lineage, descent group and ethnic group. However, women did not have many initiations apart from clitoridectomy and marriage. But women were recognized by the initiations of their husbands. The practice was conducted also with joy, pride and with lots of ululations. However the joy and celebrations that accompanied such ceremonies were short lived with the advent of the Europeans in Kenya. From 1920 onwards, the cultural events took a different direction because the colonial government advocated for the circumcision of only males and the exercise was to be done by qualified medical personnel, (KNA/PC/NZA/2/5/21, 1920-22). The shift in the cultural undertaking affected their way of performing cultural activities. Kabisai Manu (OI, 2010) avers that by the 1930s, the events that preceded circumcision were now illegal and those who conducted them were seen as criminals. However, the activities that

surrounded the event or circumcision activities called for control first before taming cattle raids. Cross-border raids were now conducted without the cultural rules that were otherwise used whenever a raid was undertaken.

Circumcision for both boys and girls was the most important kind of initiation in any of the rituals of passage in Kuria culture. The uncircumcised boys longed for the exercise because it meant that they would now marry, qualify for property ownership and be entrusted with the community security and they were to go out and conduct cattle raids from the neighboring communities. The experience in circumcision was a painful experience because there was no anesthesia. The pain was meant to test manhood; to show courage, endurance, and the ability to control one's emotions. Circumcision elevated an individual from childhood to adulthood. In order for the boy to be initiated, he had to prove himself by showing courage and bravery through being ready for the cultural cut. The community valued bravery in their *Abamura* and circumcision was a boy's first way to prove his courage, no matter how painful the cut was, (Sylvester Mwita OI, 2010)

According to Juma Madundo (OI, 2010), the circumcised young men had to show that they were grown men by herding big herds of livestock and engage in daring cross-border raids for cattle. Once circumcised, the young men became members' of *Abamura* (warriors). However the traditional form of circumcision had to change owing to the coming of colonialism with its Christian missionaries after 1920, (Munene 2009). The Kuria began to embrace the new culture of circumcising boys only and slowly taking their children to school as from 1954 though reluctantly. However, this did not deter the Kuria from engaging in their age old cultural activities that went with circumcision such as raiding for cattle before and after initiation.

Among the Kuria, circumcision was a community affair and therefore a big ceremony went with it. During the occasion, bulls were slaughtered to mark and crown the change of status in life of the young men. The ceremony therefore, demanded that many animals be slaughtered during the occasion. To meet this demand, the young men had to engage the neighboring communities for the required cows for the ceremony. Besides this, the circumcised were expected to replace the bulls that were slaughtered during their big day of initiation. This would only be done through cross-border cattle raids, (Bleeker, 1963). It was a cultural undertaking that was practiced from time immemorial and still spilled over to the periods after 1920. Such expectations perpetuated cross-border conflicts between the Maasai and Kuria communities.

Frieaber, (1987) reveals that among the Kuria, cattle raiding was an activity best experienced at the time boys were going through the healing process after circumcision. The practice was more prestigious when the young and circumcised would go out and conduct successful cross-border raids. This crowned the perception that the circumcised were full protectors of the community. These beliefs and expectations by the community, perpetuated cross-border conflicts among the Kuria and Maasai.

Incidents of young men of circumcision age refusing to be circumcised were non-existent. It was a taboo for a boy who had attained the circumcision age to refuse to undergo the cut. More so, the importance attached to the exercise did not give room for any negotiation other than negotiating on how the whole ceremony would be undertaken, (Kabisai Manu OI, 2010)

From 1935, a time when the colonial government began to assert its authority in Kuria land, the Kuria community began to experience new culture that had come with colonization and the infiltration of the Christian missionaries into their land. This was so because for quite a long time, the Kuria resisted the infiltration of the missionaries and colonial authority into their land until after 1935 when the colonial authorities began to make more their presence felt in Kuria land. The Christian Missionaries were not readily welcome until after the 1959 and in a very slow pace, ([Http://www.crawjurd.dk/Africa/kenya/kr/Christianity](http://www.crawjurd.dk/Africa/kenya/kr/Christianity)). As many people converted into Christianity, much of the culture was also being done away with slowly by slowly. By 1942, 82 young and old people had been converted to Christianity in Kebaroti Catholic Mission station, (Heald 2000).

However, the converted people emanated from regions where the Christian missionaries set mission stations in Kuria such as in Komotobo mission near Kehancha by the Maranatha missionaries, Kebaroti Catholic Mission, Getongoroma Catholic Mission near Kegonga and Kegonga Catholic mission. From 1935 onwards, Christianity continued thriving in Kuria land more especially because adherents of Christianity were seen to be

enjoying the goodies that came with it such as employment. The people, who had embraced school, were employed as clerks in government offices and therefore would be seen to be living in a relatively good life. However, those who were serious followers of their traditional cultural thinking strictly stuck to their cultural ideals and this brought conflicts between those who accommodated Christianity with those who did not and the result was a mixed culture, (Ruel 1991).

### **Marriage and Cross-Border Conflicts among the Maasai.**

Marriage was traditionally a process rather than an event for the Maasai. The representation of marriage as a process rather than single event had long been recognized in studies of nuptiality in Africa. The Maasai had a strong division of responsibilities, roles and labor between age groups and sexes and there were regional variations in both the nature of the life stages and the rituals or customs associated with them. This was composed of a group of contemporaries, united by their communal circumcision, which took place between the ages roughly of 15 and 20 years. Circumcised young men were warriors and were unable to occupy the same house with their fathers, (Wale, 1977). Historically, men who were still Morans could not marry, as this was seen as the prerogative of elders. Men ceased to be Morans when the subsequent age set was created, and become junior elders.

Marriage was a very important institution among the Maasai community. The marriage ceremonies were conducted with pomp and joy. Every adult man at the age of marriage was expected to raise the expected bride price through raiding the neighboring communities together with his contemporaries and this was conducted as a cultural undertaking with a lot of cultural rules that guided it. This was a stage in life that was viewed with a lot of respect. Once a young man had raided the neighboring community successfully and acquired enough cattle for dowry payment, he was held with respect and recognition in the community, Frieberg(1987).

Infiltration of foreigners into Maasai land interfered with a culture that was practiced with honor and recognition into a criminal activity. Cattle raids henceforth cattle raiding for pride price was done with rage and even involved the killing of people of the affected community. Initially, killing was not allowed. Communities now viewed each other with hate and with the urge to revenge, not as a cultural undertaking but an activity undertaken to avenge with anger and rage. This change of attitude was as a result of new demands from the colonial administration. This was so because the Europeans had come with a new culture that negatively impacted on the Maasai community. The Europeans had come with new understanding of what marriage was. They brought Christianity which demanded that one was to only marry one wife and no more. This was alien to them and thus an interference to their culture, (Morr OI, 2002).

The importance attached to pride price payment among the Maasai perpetuated cross-border conflict, (Payerr Ole Ntutu OI, 2010). Pride price was not an issue subject to negotiation. For a man to marry, it was his duty to look for enough cattle to pay as bride price when was of marriage age. However, if a man would not be able to raise enough cattle for bride price, his father was expected to lend a hand by giving off some cattle to the son for that purpose. Other age mates would also give the much they could but this attracted scorn and disrespect to the victim in the Maasai community. The Maasai were described as the masters of daytime and night time raiding. Glamour and prestige lay in daytime raiding, (Ndagala, 1992). Beliefs, customs and culture in general greatly contributed to the conflict that existed along the Kuria-Maasai border for many years. The culture always demanded for proper military training in order to provide security to the community and assist in the enlargement of society cattle holding.

### **Marriage and Cross-Border Conflicts among the Kuria**

The institution of marriage among the Kuria community was a much respected activity before colonialism, (Ruel, 1991). Just like the Maasai, the Kuria young men ready for marriage were expected to raise the expected bride price through raiding the neighboring community. This was conducted as a cultural undertaking with a lot of cultural rules that guided it. This rite of passage was viewed with a lot of recognition and a vital obligation by all young men who had attained the age of marriage and more especially after circumcision. After successful cattle raids, one was held with respect and recognition in the community. The woman that the man was to marry would view him with respect and confidence since he was expected to offer unquestionable

protection and security to his family, (Frieaberg, 1987).

Infiltration of foreigners into Kuria land changed a culture that was initially conducted with pride into a criminal activity. Henceforth cattle raiding for pride price was done with hostility and even involved the killing of the affected. The Kuria viewed their neighbors as enemies and not their normal and traditional neighbors who they culturally interacted with, through so many ways among them through cattle raids, but which was done according to strict traditional rules, (Marwa, OI, 2002). This was so because from 1949, Europeans had come and introduced new culture that negatively impacted on the Kuria community. The Europeans had come with new understanding of what marriage was. They advocated monogamy, circumcision of only boys and disregarded the traditional religious leaders. This was foreign to the local people and thus interfered with their culture.

Bride price among the Kuria was a rigid cultural issue which was a community's obligation. It was this rigidity that perpetuated cross-border conflict. Gilbert Botase, (OI, 2010), asserts that among the Kuria, girls were more comfortable to be married by a man who had raided cattle to pay her pride price. In the 1920s, there existed the custom among the Kuria, which required that a warrior-youth who wished to marry but lacked cattle was to present a bow or spear to his father-in-law as a sign of the cattle which he later hoped to raid and capture and then pay. With this pledge the marriage proceeded. When the youth had then been successful in a raid, the pledge was redeemed with cattle proudly brought to his father-in-law. This cultural aspect was so clear and openly evident among the Kuria. Raids were conducted with pride by even alerting their victims in advance of an impending raid. In this case the Kuria were seen as experts at night time raiding. However, this conduct was disrupted owing to the coming of Christian missionaries in Kuria land, (Bentsen, 1989). Beliefs, customs and culture in general greatly contributed to the conflict that existed along the Kuria-Maasai border for many years.

## CONCLUSIONS

The transitional rites of passage among the Kuria and Maasai communities were very important and instrumental in every undertaking. Birth was sacred and was therefore accompanied by several ceremonies in order to welcome the new born. Several rites were undertaken to fully institute the new born into the Kuria and Maasai culture. Circumcision was the most important cultural rite of passage among the two communities. It was a painful undertaking but boys had to persevere in order to exhibit attributes such as courage, endurance, bravery and control of emotions. Later after ten years, the boys were elevated into senior warriors and hence ready for marriage. Pride price in marriage was paid from the cattle acquired through cross-border raids. Marriage was very essential among the two communities of Kuria and Maasai and polygamy was allowed. This ensured continuity of the communities. The coming of the Europeans brought a new understanding of birth, circumcision and marriage. Christianity brought the concept of one wife thus bringing forth a contradiction in the Kuria and Maasai culture. These are components of society with each component having its own importance and function for the community's survival and thus justifying the application of structural functionalism to understand the consequences that followed when such institutions like marriage were interfered with.

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