

# Religious Beliefs and Cross-Border Conflicts among the Kuria and the Maasai of Kenya from 1920

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## ABSTRACT

The main aim of this article is to trace the role of religious beliefs and cross-border conflict among the Kuria and the Maasai of Kenya. This is an historical study that 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.

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.

## INTRODUCTION

The Kuria and the Maasai were known to be very arrogant and strictly against the introduction of Christianity in their communities. The Kuria are said to have arrogantly refused to be involved in Christian issues in the 1940s with the excuse that Christianity would introduce foreign culture that would corrupt the good morals of their girls and women. Consequently, they vehemently opposed Christianity in favor of their traditional religion. The Maasai on the other hand seriously opposed the introduction of any foreign religion in the name of Christianity because that would disrupt their traditional set-up and eventually do away with the Maasai culture. The Maasai and the Kuria held their traditional religion with very high esteem to the extent that they did not want any interference from any quarter no matter how beneficial the interference would have been to them. They would not imagine going against their gods to whom they had paid a lot of allegiance throughout their lives. Generally therefore, traditional religion was very pivotal to the Maasai and Kuria peoples' livelihood and also determined their day to day activities, (Bleeker 1963).

### Religious Beliefs and Conflicts among the Kuria

The Kuria were strong believers in the traditional religion which was widely fused with specific community cultural issues. There was strong belief in the traditional Supreme Being (*Enokwi*), who controlled daily activities in the Kuria community. The Kuria paid total allegiance to their cultural religion. If one was said to have gone against the traditional religion he or she could be subjected to certain forms of punishment as designed by the "*Ritongo*", (Kuria traditional court). The Kuria had the *Abarooti* (Seers), who were the custodians of the community culture. The seers would be consulted on almost all matters to be undertaken in the community.

In the 1920s, the seers (*Abarooti*) played an important role in the political field and more especially in the military organization of the Kuria just as the Laibon did among the Maasai peoples. Mbiti (1975) indicated that seers had natural power by means of which they foresaw events before they took place among many African communities. The seers were often people with sharp capacity for both foresight and insight into things. The

seers had the ability to predict future events. They in effect planned cattle raids which were undertaken by warriors, but they also acted more generally to warn of impending dangers and thus influenced the course of political and military action. If a venture was foreseen to carry more casualties than success, it was to be postponed until when it was foreseen to be favorable. This was the exact perception among the Kuria.

Mbiti (1975) further argues that upon the establishment of the European colonial government, traditional African Religion among the Kenyan communities was accused of being ancestor worship and therefore had nothing to do with the living. Traditional religion was also called superstition and magic. This was the assertion rigidly held by the Christian missionaries in Kenya. With these perceptions, the colonial government, with the instigation of the Christian missionaries, condemned the African religion among the Kuria, (Ruel1991). Therefore, in the eyes of the colonial government, the African religion was a serious display of how the Kuria were primitive and backward with no trace of any civilization.

What followed the condemnation of the Kuria traditional religion was the introduction of Christianity as from 1949 among the Kuria. The Kuria Christian converts henceforth begun denouncing their traditional religion in the strongest terms possible. Consequently therefore, the rituals that went with certain activities among the Kuria were criminalized and banned. Religious activities that accompanied the preparation for cross-border cattle raids were also condemned. Initiation rites were also greatly hampered because they were viewed as a perpetration of primitive ways of life. The most affected was the illegalization of female circumcision among the Kuria, something that many non-Christian Kuria saw as a form of disregard of their religion and culture. On the other hand, the colonial government was pleased with the Christian development in Kuria land following the change of heart by many of the Christian converts as regards cultural indulgence of the community, (KNA/PC/NZA/3/4/9/2, 1950).

The ceremonies that accompanied marriages also infuriated the colonial government. The ceremonies were seen by the colonial government as backward and therefore needed to be done away with. Marriage as a form of transition from childhood to adulthood among the Kuria was culturally done and celebrated in the traditional manner. Cattle for the payment of bride price were obtained from cross-border cattle raids which were done with pride and prestige because the exercise was well sanctioned by the elders of the Kuria community.

Archival sources show how cultural inclinations attached to traditional Kuria religion as regards marriages intensified cross-border cattle raids especially during times when individual *Abamura intended* to marry, (KNA/PC/NRV/3/1/20, 1959). It was the duty and responsibility of missionaries to convert and sensitize the Kuria against these cultural activities and convert them into Christianity which was perceived to be the religion of civility. The traditional religion therefore, begun to be phased out from particular regions albeit with a lot of resistance. As a result, European missionaries begun to penetrate Kuria land mainly after the Second World War and establish mission stations, (Heald2000). By 1963, Christian missionaries had been established in Kegonga and Komotobo in West Kuria. Informants who were subjected to oral interview gave information that culminated in the following computation in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 The influence of Religious Beliefs on Cross-Border Conflict

Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Total	
ATR was the	15	14	37	66
Recognized	23%	21%	56%	100%
religion				
Warriors were blessed	9	12	45	66
before going to war	14%	18%	68%	100%
<b>Total</b>	29	29	82	140

The data and statistics above summarized the role of traditional religion in the conflict that was a common phenomenon among the Kuria between the 1920 and 1963. African Traditional Religion which was the most predominant among the Kuria community played a big role in the conflict that afflicted the two communities for a long time. This conclusion was reached after 57% of the respondents agreed that African Traditional Religion was highly recognized among them. The high percentage of the respondents who agreed with the argument comprised of people who had stayed amongst the Kuria for a long time and were aged above 25 years and therefore had good grip of traditional and cultural issues of the people of the areas under study. However 23% of the respondents disagreed with the argument. These people's response was dictated by their shift from their Traditional Religion to Christianity and therefore the argument appeared ridiculing if they positively and actively participated in justifying traditional religion and hence opted to look at the assertion differently. But at the same time, 21% of the respondents were not sure whether reliance in Traditional African Religion contributed to cross-border conflict. This was mainly because the respondents were government officers who had just been posted to the region and hence did not have full information of what afflicted the people of the region as concerned the frequent cross-border conflicts.

In the same line, 68% of the respondents agreed that whenever warriors went to war, they had to get blessings from elders and religious leaders by undergoing rigorous cultural rites that were characterized by traditional religious ceremonies. The respondents argued that the blessings given increased the warriors' ego, courage and desire to engage the neighboring community for cattle raids. Blessings had a bearing on the extent of success the warriors enjoyed. The blessings targeted groups of warriors who were identified to undertake a raid. These findings were possible because many of the respondents were warriors and therefore knew and understood what went along with stock raids and subsequently cross-border conflict. This argument strongly threw light to the conclusion that religion and more so Traditional Religion had a strong bearing on cross-border conflicts between the Maasai and the Kuria. The data collected also indicated that 23% of the respondents disagreed with the argument because some had already converted to Christianity and therefore would not like to be dragged back to what they were fighting to bury and forget. 18% of the respondents were not sure whether warriors received blessings whenever the two communities engaged each other in cross-border conflict. This was mainly because these respondents were young and therefore would not fully comprehend the role of traditional religion in such interactions between the two communities.

### **Religious Beliefs and Conflicts among the Maasai**

Among the Maasai, there was a belief in *Enkai* (god) who was the source of successes and failures. Sacrifices were offered to appease *Enkai* in order for him to guide them in their undertakings and thus emerge successful whenever they indulged in cross-border cattle raids. In the event *Enkai* was annoyed, the venture would be ruined and hence make them suffer big casualties. It was *Enkai* who enabled systematic graduation of individuals from one stage in life to another through specific cultural activities that were assumed to have been sanctioned by Him. There also existed some form of protocol on how to reach *Enkai*. An individual would not directly communicate to the community god. These communications were always done through intermediaries such as diviners, mediums, seers, prophets, and other well-known religious experts from the Maasai community. Among the Maasai there were the Laibon, (seer) who was consulted on matters that affected the community. These religious leaders were always consulted to examine any event to be undertaken in order to find whether it was possible or not depending on the dangers foreseen, (Sainbull and Carr 1981). Therefore, *Nkai* generally controlled every bit of life among the Maasai.

What followed the condemnation of the Maasai traditional religion was the introduction of Christianity from 1890, (Nathan 2004). Consequently, the Maasai Christian converts resisted the traditional cultural undertakings which to them went against Christian teachings. This understanding went along with the colonial government policies and anticipations thus making it criminalize such activities as cross-border interactions which were through cattle raiding. Whenever a raid was planned, several religious activities were undertaken in order to make the raid successful. However, with the introduction of Christianity in Maasai land, such activities were seen as un-Godly and therefore condemned. Circumcision of females was banned and as a result this ban went against society expectations. Alongside this, marriage of more than one wife was condemned by the church doctrines. All these interfered with the Maasai Traditional Religion and therefore many of those who were not converted to Christianity continued with cross-border cattle raids regardless of

what the colonial government did to avert such activities among the Maasai community. Cross-border cattle raids were also perpetuated as a form of retaliation to the colonial government because of their interference in matters of the Maasai traditional culture, (Bentsen, 1989).

Archival sources show that cultural marriage undertakings perpetuated cross-border conflict, (KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/20, 1959). It therefore became the responsibility of missionaries to 'civilize' the Maasai and convert many of them into Christianity which was seen as the religion of the civilized. The traditional religion therefore, was interfered within those regions that embraced it. As a result of this, many more European missionaries began to trickle into Maasailand mostly after the Second World War. But they entered Maasai land and established missions because of the large tracts of land in Maasailand and their lack of interest in cattle and thereby not competitors to the Maasai cattle. By 1963, Christian missionaries had been established in Kilgoris.

### **Effects of Christianity in Kuria and Maasailand.**

The settlement of Christian missionaries in Kuria and Maasai land impacted both positively and negatively on the cultures and their Traditional Religion. The customs that accompanied traditional marriages decreased tremendously. Girls who initially were proud to be married by men who had stolen cattle included in their pride price, begun to change their perception and readily accepted to be married by young men who had embraced Christianity, (Binagi, 1976). Consequently, the importance that was attached to raided cattle as the most legitimate herd for pride price begun to fade off by the close of the 1950s.

Circumcision which was conducted with pomp comprising of several ceremonies began to crumble down slowly. By 1940, circumcision among the Maasai and Kuria was conducted with some level of modesty by doing it in better medical facilities though the Maasai continued with the *manyatta* system. Cattle raids which were common during times of circumcision reduced greatly because among the circumcised were the already converted Christians. (Bentson 1989) opines that by the 1950s circumcision of girls among the two communities was reduced by encouraging young girls to go to school. However, the circumcision of girls continued on marginal levels among the two communities though secretly. The cultural activities that accompanied circumcision were also greatly reduced and Christianity more eagerly accepted by few people among the two communities of Kuria and Maasai. All these were the product of the acceptance of Christianity to the two communities.

Many of the Maasai people, who initially cherished their Traditional African religion, got converted to Christianity and thereby developed a feeling of disregard and dislike for their old traditional ways, (Saitoti, 1980). In place of their traditional activities, the Kuria young men and women began to embrace Christianity, such that by the time of independence in Kenya in 1963, many Kuria young people were assisting the missionaries in spreading Christianity, (Marwa, 2002). This, to some extent, reduced cross-border conflict though it was not the end to problems of cattle raiding. Those who abandoned their traditional religion greatly assisted the European missionaries in establishing more mission stations both in Kuria and Maasailand.

The advent of Christianity brought in western education to the two communities of Kuria and Maasai. Those who embraced Christianity, accepted western education and preached ideals that were against their traditional culture and religion which had accommodated and fully supported cross-border cattle raids. This to some extent reduced cross-border conflict between the Maasai and Kuria, (Tepilit, 2006). Many of the people who embraced Christianity encouraged their children to go to school and learn western education and thus a shift from informal ways of education to formal ways.

Bleeker (1963) argues that the period that ushered in the much awaited independence in 1963, saw the colonial government introduce policies that focused on the preservation of the national parks and reserves, without due recognition of the culturally rich Maasai ethnic group, thus making the traditional Maasai way of life increasingly difficult to maintain and preserve for the coming generation to experience and learn from it. The independent Kenyan government championed the implementation of the same project in Kuria and Trans-Mara, to help Maasai ethnic leaders find a way to preserve their traditional way of life while also trying to balance the educational needs of the Maasai and Kuria children. The independent Kenyan government also

introduced tobacco farming in Kuria thus exposing the Kuria to the aspect of mixed farming, (Omuga, 2009).

Because of the lucrative opportunities associated with tobacco farming, many Kuria young people, decided to venture into it thus bringing forth another group of people who embraced tobacco farming, others who cherished cattle rearing and another group who practiced both tobacco farming and cattle rearing. The infiltration of visitors mostly missionaries to Kuria and Maasailand, brought in new ways of livelihood, (Kusiro 2000). The Kuria, for example, were introduced to tobacco farming, something that was alien to them. However, tobacco farming did not pick up well until after independence. This form of livelihood changed the economic activities of the Kuria a great deal. Many of the young warriors (*Abamura*), shifted from their cultural cross-border cattle raiding to tobacco farming. However, tobacco farming did not fully eradicate cross-border conflicts because cattle raiding continued among the two communities.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Kuria and Maasai traditional beliefs were the foundation through which cross-border conflicts were based. The two communities strongly believed in the guidance given by the seers on matters to do with the cross-border cattle raids. *Nkai* among the Maasai and *Enokwi* among the Kuria, were the supreme beings with mystical powers in life. The supreme beings had so much influence on military organization among the two communities. Warriors would always receive blessings before engaging in any cross-border contact. The blessings were undertaken through oaths, sprinkling and drinking of some herbal concoctions, sacrifices and prayers to the supreme beings. However, the African Traditional Religion was rendered weak by the colonial government and more so by the missionaries. This led to the missionary's aggressive movement to evangelize the two communities of Kuria and Maasai communities. Consequently, Christianity was introduced thus undermining the Traditional African Religion among the Kuria and the Maasai communities. The ceremonies that accompanied traditional activities like marriage were a nuisance to the British colonial government and the Missionaries who had established mission stations across Kuria and Maasailand by 1960. These missionaries fought aggressively to convert as many Africans as possible to Christianity and this had several effects to the societies which distracted them from their cultural adherence and opted to embrace western civilization.

The objective that was discussed in this chapter was whether Religious Beliefs contributed to cross-border conflicts between the Maasai and the Kuria. Structural Functionalism theory was used to give guidance since the Traditional religion's involvement in the cross-border conflicts was directed by social structures in the two communities who were responsible of blessings to warriors, foretelling either a raid was to succeed or fail and the medicine men who were to take care of the injured during the raid.

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