



INFLUENCE OF CULTURE IN MITIGATING INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN MOUNT ELGON SUB-COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study, is to look into the role of cultural practices in mitigating inter-ethnic conflict in Mount Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya. The objective of the study was to assess the influence of culture on mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Mount Elgon sub-county, Bungoma. This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to obtain in-depth information on the role of cultural practices in mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Mount Elgon Sub-County. It employed a mixed methods approach with a target population of approximately 34,904 adults above the age of 18 years from Mount Elgon Sub County. The sample size for the study was determined using Krejcie and Morgan sampling tables which gave 379 respondents. Interviews, focused group discussions and questionnaires were used in collecting data which was largely qualitative. The raw data was categorized through tabulation and coding. Descriptive statistics as well as thematic analysis were used in presenting research findings. The study established that cultural aspects such as language, marriage and initiation can have negative influence on conflict mitigation and is a trigger to inter-ethnic conflicts. Residents of Mount Elgon Sub County are willing to support police initiative to mitigate inter-ethnic conflicts, and the adoption of community-oriented policy making can have a positive influence on inter-ethnic conflict mitigation. It is hoped that the study finding will benefit a number of stakeholders including peace promoters, county government of Bungoma planners, peace experts and conflict resolution professionals in Mount Elgon Sub-County and other areas within Kenya, Africa and the world at large as well as contribute to already existing pull of knowledge in the area of development studies while providing a fertile material for literature review by those who will do similar or related studies.

Keywords: inter-ethnic conflict, culture, mediation, reconciliation, resolution.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Mount Elgon Sub-County in Kenya is a region characterized by its rich cultural diversity, housing various ethnic groups, each with its distinct traditions, languages, and social norms. This area, however, has also been a hotspot for inter-ethnic conflicts, primarily driven by competition for land and resources, historical grievances, and political tensions. These conflicts have led to significant social and economic disruptions, exacerbating poverty and undermining development

efforts. The complexity of these conflicts requires a multifaceted approach to resolution, with cultural practices and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms playing a crucial role in mitigating tensions and fostering peace.

Culture serves as a vital tool for conflict resolution, offering indigenous methods that resonate more deeply with the local communities compared to externally imposed solutions. Traditional leaders, community elders, and cultural rituals have historically been instrumental in mediating disputes and restoring harmony. These cultural elements are embedded in the social fabric of the communities, providing a sense of identity and continuity. Understanding and leveraging these cultural practices can enhance peacebuilding efforts, promoting reconciliation and sustainable coexistence among the diverse ethnic groups in Mount Elgon Sub-County. This study aims to explore the influence of culture in mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts, examining how traditional practices and norms contribute to conflict resolution and community cohesion in this region.

Michael (2012) observes that societies need to be accommodating and worry less about past conflicts regardless of the differences in religion, ethnicity or politics. Human desires and endeavors for peaceful existence have also been part and parcel of human history throughout the ages with different epochs exhibiting different approaches to resolving conflicts ranging from mediation, arbitration, entrepreneurship, negotiation, persuasion, compromise, consensus building, judicial proceedings to the community-based approaches.

A casual run through history reveals that conflicts are not particular to Mount Elgon sub-county, but have always existed throughout the world, with different players and approaches attempting to resolve them. In the ancient China, Confucius (551 – 479 BC), in his teachings, observed that natural harmony should not be disrupted, and discouraged any form of adversarial proceedings as being the antithesis of harmony (Barrett, 2004). He, therefore, encouraged mediation and recommended its inclusion in all governmental administrations. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, mediation is the process of talking to two separate people or groups involved in a disagreement to try to help them to agree or find a solution to their problems. This approach is aimed at responding to conflicts through a third party who plays an active role in resolving the conflict.

During the mediaeval period, which was largely dominated by the Christian tradition, matters on conflict were addressed from the biblical teachings. Barrett (2004) further notes that, the conflict resolutions relied on a number of biblical references, including arbitration, forgiveness, and peaceful reconciliation. He further asserts that attempts were made to avoid court or violence as a means for resolving conflicts. The responsibility of conflict resolution was preserved for priests who handled both spiritual and secular matters. On top of engaging a third party in resolving conflicts as recommended in mediation and arbitration, reconciliation, as recommended by the church did not put into consideration cause of conflict, but only sought compatibility among different beliefs.

The reconciliatory approach extended into the early modern ages with Europe entrenching it into its system expanding players beyond priests. Cummins and Kounine (2016) explain that the pursuit of conflict and its resolution could involve whole villages, and all manners of personnel including local magistrates, legal faculties, priests and pastors, government officials, nobility and even Pope. Both men and women were involved, though each having different methods in approaching

reconciliation. By expanding the players, the modern period seems to recognize the fact that the question of peacebuilding cannot be a sole responsibility of an individual, but for everybody.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Mount Elgon Sub-County has experienced inter-ethnic conflicts rooted in land disputes and population growth. These conflicts have arisen due to the mismanagement of land tenure issues over time, leading to the erosion of traditional land tenure systems. The situation has fueled competition among different ethnic groups for land resources, further exacerbated by a corrupt political system that has exploited land as a means to reward political allies. Lack of peace has been persistent in the region for several decades resulting in displacements, loss of properties and lives, economic stagnation and declining development. Other factors such as cultural practices, inter-community relations, resource distribution, and a history of violence and “militianization” due to the availability of dangerous weapons within the reach of the locals have contributed to the animosity within the communities without any lasting solution.

Within the current decade cases of security instability have been witnessed in areas of Kopsiro, Chesikaki, Chelebei, Cheptais, Kipsis and Kebee, attracting interventions from the government, non-governmental organizations and religious. Different mechanism and strategies for dispute and conflict resolution including military intervention, legal procedures, reconciliation, among others have been utilized, yet the reviewed literature and existing situation in the location of study indicate that no lasting peace has been found. To a large extent, the various methods and approaches utilized to mitigate conflict have largely been driven from without with the exclusion of culture. It is, therefore, important that this study be conducted to fill in the gaps on role of cultural practices in mitigating conflict in Mount Elgon sub-county, Bungoma County Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multicultural societies have increasingly become hotspots for violent conflicts. While it's not always the mere presence of diverse cultures that causes conflicts in these communities, cultural differences emerge to become entangled in conflicts, leading to escalation, facilitating the mobilization of conflict parties, and motivating the use of violence, eventually resulting in intractable conflicts. These cultural disparities can act as both barriers and catalysts for conflict resolution as well as peacemaking efforts in multicultural settings. While they can hinder these processes, they can also serve as a resource for conflict resolution if they are known, even though their impacts are not fully comprehended. Successful peace building in diverse cultures of societies hinges on a profound understanding of cultural differences (Essien, 2020).

According to Edafenene (2021), conflicts are often due to broken patterns of relationships sustained by unjust structures. Therefore, while working on the creation of new relationships and a new vision for the future is important, it is equally imperative that structures that protract conflict are curtailed and new just structures instituted. As pointed out by other researchers, globalization has called for having all strategies for peace building brought on board. The need for theoretical and empirical considerations cannot be overemphasized (Boege, 2009). On the other hand, Schiff (2013) advocates for involvement of the conflicting sides into talks. This helps in addressing both preexisting and existing points of conflict. This is known as restorative approach with solves any existing malignment that were never addressed (Schiff, 2013).

Inter-ethnic conflicts have been a recurring issue in many parts of the world, including Kenya, where diverse ethnic groups coexist in various regions. According to Brown (2010), inter-ethnic conflicts often stem from competition over resources, historical grievances, and political manipulation. These conflicts can lead to prolonged violence, displacement, and socio-economic instability. In the context of Mount Elgon Sub-County, such conflicts have been particularly pronounced due to the scarcity of arable land and the area's historical context of land distribution and ownership disputes (Mwangi, 2006). Understanding the underlying causes of these conflicts is crucial for developing effective mitigation strategies.

Culture plays a significant role in conflict resolution, especially in traditional societies where customary practices and norms guide social interactions. Osaghae (1999) notes that traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, such as mediation by elders and communal negotiations, have been effective in addressing disputes within and between ethnic groups. These methods are rooted in the cultural context of the communities and often lead to more sustainable peace compared to formal legal processes. In Mount Elgon, the use of traditional conflict resolution practices has shown promise in mitigating inter-ethnic tensions, as they are more attuned to the local socio-cultural dynamics (Kigen, 2011).

The effectiveness of cultural practices in conflict resolution is supported by various case studies from different regions. For instance, Lederach (1997) emphasizes the importance of incorporating local cultural practices into peacebuilding efforts, arguing that such approaches are more likely to be accepted and respected by the community members. Similarly, a study by Pkalya, Adan, and Masinde (2004) on pastoralist communities in Kenya found that traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, such as councils of elders and customary law, played a crucial role in resolving conflicts over grazing land and water resources. These findings highlight the potential of leveraging cultural practices to foster peace and reconciliation in conflict-prone areas.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to obtain in-depth information on influence of culture on mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Mount Elgon Sub-County, Kenya. The study employed a mixed methods approach with a target population of approximately 34,904 adults aged between 18- and 80-years from Mount Elgon sub county. The population was stratified into local administration, political leaders, religious leaders, and villagers. The sample size for this study was determined using Krejcie and Morgan sampling tables which gives 379 respondents. Interviews, focused group discussions and questionnaires were used in collecting data. The data collection was largely qualitative. The raw data was categorized through tabulation and coding. Descriptive statistics as well as thematic analysis were used. This included use of percentages and frequencies.

RESULTS

Demographic Data of Respondents

Respondents were categorized into two gender types: male and female. Respondents' responses on the aspect of gender are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	228	60.2
Female	151	39.8
Total	379	100.0

Data in table 1 shows that majority 228(60.2%) of the respondents involved in the study were males. This was attributed to the belief that matters of security are male dominated in many Kenyan communities. However, a considerable number 151(39.8%) of the respondents involved in the study were females. This was attributed to the fact that in the modern society women hold important positions in the community such as chiefs and village elders.

Age Bracket of Respondents

Respondents were also investigated on their age brackets as shown in table 2.

Table 3 shows that majority 180(47.5%) of the respondents involved in the study were in the age bracket of above 50 years. These were members of the society who had witnessed several community conflicts and had credible information on the resolution of such conflicts. Similarly, the age brackets of 41-50 years constituted 109(28.8%) of the respondents involved in the study. They were equally knowledgeable and had memory about the previous conflicts and how they were solved. The age brackets of 30-40 years and below 30 years constituted of 57(15%) and 33(8.7%) respectively.

Table 2: Age Bracket of Respondents

Age Bracket in years	Frequency	Percent
Below 30	33	8.7
30-40	57	15.0
41-50	109	28.8
Above 50	180	47.5
Total	379	100.0

Length of Respondents' Stay in the Location of Study

Regarding length of stay in the location of study, table 3 shows that majority 368 (97.1%) of the respondents involved in the study had been there for a period of over 10 years. This was an indication that they understood the issues of inter-ethnic conflict and conflict resolution. Those who had stayed there for a period of 6-10 years constituted 10(2.6%) of the respondents and majorly had religious leaders who were transferable as per their constitutions and leadership arrangements. The assistant county commissioner (ACC) constituted the remaining 1(0.3%) of the respondents involved in the study and had stayed for a period of 1-5 years.

Table 3: Length of Respondents' Stay in the Location of Study

Length of Stay (in years)	Frequency	Percent
Below 1 year	0	0.0
1-5 years	1	0.3
6-10 years	10	2.6
Above 10 years	368	97.1
Total	379	100.0

Culture on mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Mount Elgon Sub-County

With regard to influence of culture on mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts in Mount Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma, respondents pointed out some of cultural aspects that may hinder or aid in mitigation of inter-ethnic conflicts. Circumcision was pointed out as one of the cultural practices that jeopardize mitigation of inter-ethnic conflicts in the study area. It was noted that circumcision leads to early marriages which ultimately lead to high economic times that motivate the concerned to engage in inter-ethnic clashes as a way of scrambling for resources to sustain their young and fast-growing families. The community engages in female genital mutilation as well something that promotes early marriages and cuts off education of the girl-child. This aspect in itself discourages the community from marrying members of other communities they do not genitally mutilate their girls. One of those involved in the focused group discussion noted that:

“circumcision as a traditional right celebrated by all our community members and indirectly leads to inter-ethnic conflicts since the initiates marry early and the young families need to be fed leading to scramble for scarce resources by attacking other communities who live among us” (Focused Group Participant, Kongit Area: 29th April, 2024)

It was also reported that intermarriages were not allowed. The culture does not allow its members to marry from other communities. This means the community is determined to preserve its culture for posterity. However, some elements of the culture are not pro-mitigating inter-ethnic conflicts. Tribalism was also mentioned as another aspect of culture that enhances inter-ethnic conflicts. Tribalism leads to inter-ethnic clashes in the sense that members of one community see the other communities as foreigners, intruders and dangerous to their culture and general way of life. Tribalism is deep within the community involving the political class who encourage their members to put priorities on serving locals before any other person. The political class has evidently promoted tribalism through influencing recruitment of teachers, disciplined forces, civil servants and issues of education bursaries and scholarships. The community members believe that land was inherited from their fathers should be guarded against other communities settling on it. One of the participants noted that:

“tribalism has been with us for many years just like it is in other communities and our people should be given priority in this era of economic hard times and scarce resources. Every people have their own original homes and should not expect to be catered or in our backyards” (Focused Group Participant, Chelebei Area: 30th April, 2024)

Language as an aspect of culture was seen as an anti-mitigating barrier in handling inter-ethnic conflicts. Language barrier hinders proper communication between the communities living within Mount Elgon Sub-County and this antagonizes mitigation attempts. The dominant community prefers their language over any other and sensitive matters should only be discussed in that language. Majority of the members are monolingual and can only speak their language and this

poses difficulties when it comes to negotiation in the face of inter-ethnic clashes. It was aptly noted that:

“our language should be protected to remain pure from infiltration by other languages which are likely to expose our child to bad behaviour from other communities. All secrets of the communities should be discussed in our mother tongue”, (Focused Group Participant, Kongil Area: 10th March, 2024)

Furthermore, language is used as a weapon of planning evil against other communities. Anyone who uses a different language from that used by the dominant community is looked at as an enemy who should be dealt with. A participant notes that:

“language contributes to inter-ethnic conflicts through suspicion and backbiting”, (Focused Group Participant, Kongit Area: 29th April, 2024)

Participants also noted that the community still held some of the archaic and outdated beliefs such as male chauvinism; that women should not be allowed in a decision making discussion. This makes them to lose out on important information that would be provided by female participants in any given conversation likely to mitigate inter-ethnic conflicts. The community further maintains that land should only be inherited by men, not women. It was noted by one of the participants that:

“in our community, women are not involved in community decision making; only men count in such matters. Women are not trusted with secrets since they can easily leak to our adversaries”, ((Focused Group Participant, Kapsokwony Area: 29th April, 2024).

Generally, another participant notes that:

“the causes of inter-ethnic conflicts in our sub-county are attributed to land dispute, lack of education, misguidance of the youth by elders, poverty and politicians”, (ibid).

CONCLUSION

The study highlights those cultural practices in Mount Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma, have a dual role in inter-ethnic conflict mitigation. While traditional conflict resolution mechanisms hold promise for fostering peace, other cultural practices such as circumcision, tribalism, and language exclusivity exacerbate conflicts. Circumcision leads to early marriages and economic pressures, driving resource-based clashes, while female genital mutilation disrupts education and reinforces ethnic divides. Tribalism, perpetuated by the political class, fosters discrimination and hostility, and language barriers hinder effective communication and negotiation. Additionally, male chauvinism and restrictive land inheritance practices exclude women from decision-making, exacerbating land disputes and inter-ethnic tensions. To mitigate conflicts effectively, it is essential to embrace beneficial cultural practices while reforming those that perpetuate division and violence.

RECOMMENDATION

The study makes the following recommendation:

There is need to have sustainable sensitization of members of different communities to shun To effectively mitigate inter-ethnic conflicts in Mount Elgon Sub-County, it is recommended to adopt a multifaceted approach that leverages positive cultural practices while reforming detrimental ones. This includes promoting traditional conflict resolution mechanisms that are inclusive and community-driven. There should be efforts to discourage harmful practices like circumcision and

female genital mutilation through education and community engagement, highlighting their long-term socio-economic impacts. Enhancing inter-ethnic communication by encouraging multilingual education and dialogue can bridge language barriers. Additionally, addressing tribalism requires policies that promote equitable resource distribution and inclusive governance, while challenging discriminatory practices perpetuated by political leaders. Lastly, empowering women in decision-making and ensuring gender equality in land inheritance can provide more balanced and effective conflict resolution strategies.

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