



# Contributions of Social Community Structures on Conflict Management among Pastoral Communities in the Ilemi Triangle

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## Abstract

Peace continues to be elusive in the Ilemi Triangle, located at the intersection of Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan. The area experiences intermittent conflict among Turkana, Dassanech, Nganyatom, and Toposa. This study focused on the increased frequency and intensity of violent conflict between the Dassanech and Turkana communities in the region. Drawing from the Systems Theory, the study established how informal community social structures contribute to sustainable conflict management among the pastoralist communities in the Ilemi Triangle. Using qualitative case study methods, the study held in-depth interviews with members of local Dassanech and Turkana communities purposively selected to include a range of different members from each community who engage in inter-communal dialogue. These in-depth interviews were supplemented by focus group discussions of participants through a quota sampling, each involving members from four *kraals* and *kebele* on either side of the conflict line who are immediately affected by the conflict. The data was analysed based on themes and sub-themes.—There is compelling evidence that the social roles within the structures are functional and influential. Specific functions are designated to different roles, and each role, through its respective functions, creates the system that manages the community. The study provides insights into processes associated with conflict and cooperation between these communities from social and organizational perspectives.

## Introduction

This research outlines how informal community social structures contribute to conflict management among pastoralist communities. The study explicitly references the Dassanech and Turkana who live in the Ilemi Triangle. In the past ten years, incidences of conflict have increased between the pastoralist communities. More than twelve cases have been recorded between January and December of 2023 where people have lost lives, animals were stolen, and property was damaged. Unfortunately, these sporadic attacks escalate into collective community responses in the form of retaliation, increased animosity and tension. Progress has yet to be made in finding a long-term sustainable conflict management framework solution.

The Ilemi Triangle was born out of the 'scramble for Africa', a product of the unscrupulous drive by both colonialists and Ethiopia to expand their empires, control people, extract natural resources, and fortify their reputations as imperialists (African Union Border Program, 2014). Mburu (2007) and Amutabi (2010) highlight why and how the Ilemi Triangle became a disputed territory and, in Mburu's words, an "unfixed bandit frontier" claimed by Sudan (now South Sudan), Kenya, and Ethiopia. Other reasons for the conflicts in the area are the Ilemi Triangle's disputed borders, contested grazing grounds, lack of state policies, and historical marginalisation. Depending on the



origin of a geographical map today, some originating in Kenya will place the Ilemi Triangle in Kenya, while others will show it as part of South Sudan.

To this day, the Turkana, Dassanech, Nyangatom and Toposa continue to graze their animals and access water points in the Ilemi Triangle, which has sometimes led to violent skirmishes between the pastoralists. This is a complex situation for them. It is about defending their customary grazing lands through traditional mechanisms and resolving conflict between them. Yet they are often the pawns in more fantastic geo-political intrigues and procrastination by states to resolve outstanding disagreements characterised by indifference and reactionary interventions. Conflict, for one reason or another, has become part of life in the Ilemi Triangle.

### **Literature Review**

Informal social structures can contribute to a sustainable conflict management framework. McKinney (2015) explains that these structures are context-specific, less expensive, and are immediate indigenous interventions driven by the social context of relations between people and communities. In addition, Cox (2015) argues that traditional structures are embedded in relationships, trust, recognised local roles and community structures. Such realities often need to be investigated when creating a conflict management framework. In traditional and Indigenous settings, decisions are rarely documented; instead, recording is based on oral tradition, and results pursue a solution with a local implementation strategy (Olaitan & Isike, 2019). This can mean that external actors often overlook local knowledge, experience, and processes, favouring more technical and formal problem-solving processes.

However, literature points to the value and purposefulness of informal community social structures in searching for solutions to often intractable conflicts (Bar-tal, 2013). For instance, the Colombian peace process was marked by grassroots interventions and the mobilisation of communities to search for peace (Ghebretkle, 2017). In Northern Ireland, local community groups took many initiatives to force more formal structures to finally initiate conflict management processes, bringing two antagonistic communities to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Brewer, 2013). In Upper Nawach, in Afghanistan, a participatory development council of local people was instrumental as a dispute-resolving body (Haider, 2009). Many of these examples give significant insights into how local community structures have contributed to conflict management but must be seen as context-specific because intra-state conflicts are complex and have many different layers of intricacies.

Ademowo (2015) notes that African societies have elaborate and well-established conflict management, peace-making, peacebuilding, conflict monitoring, prevention, and early warning mechanisms. In these African societies, informal methods for conflict resolution include mediation, adjudication, reconciliation, arbitration, and negotiations (Ajayi & Buhari, 2014). Ademowo (2015) further argues that existing methods and institutions embedded in a community's social structures are highly effective, respected, and binding to all concerned parties. The people preferred these informal methods because they were less intimidating and applied in a familiar environment.

Community-based traditional methods of conflict management have worked well in the past (Gebre, 2010). The interplay and dynamics of the social structures of both the Dassanech and Turkana can enhance the understanding of community roles, power and legitimacy, leading to the knowledge of the capabilities to manage conflict. Within the respective structures of the communities are dynamics that influence the intervention by elders, who are the most senior members of the communities and are said to have the most significant influence in determining peace initiatives. A closer look at the roles, values, trust, agreements, and processes in engaging the other community may lead to a deeper understanding of how a sustainable conflict management framework could be enhanced and operationalised.

This research adopted systems theory, articulating how social organisations are based on norms and values and how individuals who constitute the system function and act within it. Systems



theory applies to this study for several reasons. Firstly, it is derived from the hard sciences and can be applied to behaviour and social sciences. Secondly, systems theory can also be used in the social world on large and small scales. Thirdly, it is concerned with relations that are highly pertinent to this study, as the focus is on communities within the confines of their origins and geographical locations.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the social organising of pastoralist communities and the dynamics of this organising in ensuring sustainable conflict management. The research design was a case study; according to Bromley (1990, p.302), a case study is "a systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest." In considering a case study design, the reality is that the conflict under investigation is both unpredictable and exceptional. The conflict is unpredictable when violence happens. It is outstanding because it crosses an international border in a zone on both countries' periphery, further complicating situational dynamics. Therefore, a case study is deemed appropriate because of the nature of the conflict and its unpredictability.

For this study, the target population comprised members of the Dassanech and Turkana communities, specifically those living on either side of the international border between Kenya and Ethiopia. The study directly sampled the adult population of the Turkana who live in Lapur Ward of Turkana North, Kenya, and the adult members of the Dassanech, who live in Dassanech Woreda, South Omo Zone, in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) of Ethiopia. The Lapur Ward is 3,241 square kilometres with an adult population of 5,233 (KNBS, 2019). The Dassanech Woreda has an area of 2,000 square km with an adult population of 45,720 (CSA, 2007). Purposive sampling selected individuals considered relevant to the study from the Lapur Ward in Turkana and the Dassanech Woreda. Data was collected from four *Kraals* and four Kebele purposively selected on either side of the border through FGD (48 participants) and interviews (16 participants). The total amount of participants was 64.

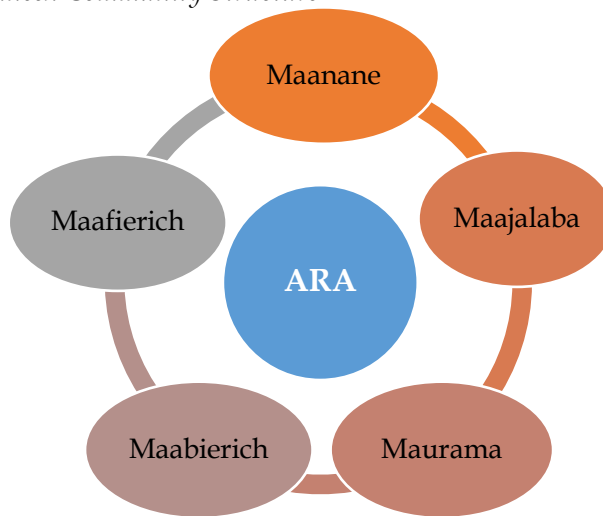
### **Discussion**

In presenting the field research data, the names of the participants are omitted to respect the autonomy, privacy, and dignity of research participants, ensuring social responsibility and maintaining scientific integrity. The data represents both communities. The research was conducted between 16<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

#### ***Social roles among the Dassanech and Turkana***

Figure 1 shows the social structure of the Dassanech. The *Ara* in the centre is the meeting point of the elders, which takes place each evening. It is essential to recognise the significance of the *Ara* within the social structures of the Dassanech. It can be described as the council of elders and meets in the *Nap*. This is the point of meeting, discussion, communication, and decision-making.

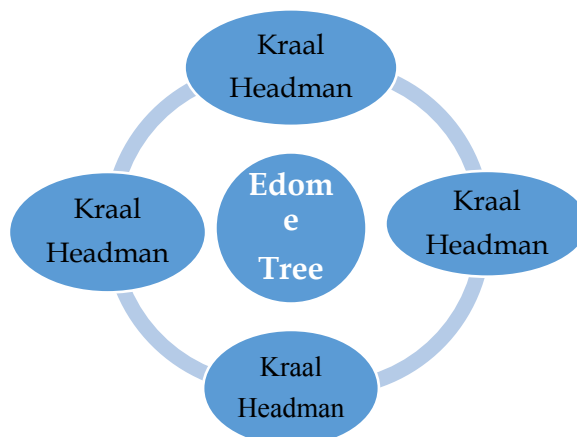
Figure 1: Dassanech Community Structure



The social roles of the *Maanane* within the village showed his power within the community, the special protection he gave to the *Kebele*, and his arbitration of disputes within the community and the neighbouring community, the Turkana. The *Maaurama* is the second significant leader with a social role among the Dassanech and is the head of the age set. The third considerable person is the *Maafierich*, who plays the role of a prayer leader. Through an interview with the wife of a *Maafierich*, the results reveal the mystical nature of the role of the *Maafierich*, showing how he controls, protects, and prays for people in the Dassanech community. The fourth significant social role is that of the *Maabierich*. The person of the *Maabierich* protects the herders when they take the cattle to graze close to the Turkana. He will follow the herders and light a fire. The fifth significant role is that of the *Maajalaba*. The *Maajalaba* is in charge of the *Dhimi Ceremony*, which involves circumcision. As such, the *Maajalaba* operates in unison with the *Maanane*, who in turn invites the *Maabierich*, the *Maaurama*, and the *Maafierich* to become involved in resolving the problems in the community and with the neighbouring community, the Turkana.

On the other side of the conflict and the international border live the Turkana, who also have their structures. The research data collected within the informal social structure of the Turkana community revealed two key figures: The Headman and the *Emuron*.

Figure 2: Turkana Community Structure



Firstly, it is essential to mention the significance of the Edome tree (*Cordia sinensis*), one of the different trees found among the Ilemi Triangle pastoral communities. Among the pastoralists, trees provide shade, firewood and raw materials for local instruments such as seats, sticks and



ornaments. The plant also has medicinal value as it treats malaria and intestinal disorders. In addition to these strengths, it provides shade where the headmen meet almost every evening under this tree to discuss issues arising from the *kraals*.

The headman oversees the day-to-day running of his family and the extended family. The *kraal* where he lives is a fenced area where several related families live together. Inside the *kraal* are the various households where families live and where the animals are kept in pens. The other important figure with authority is the *Emuron*. The persons of the *Emuron* are described as diviners or priests, essential figures within the Turkana community, and crucial cultural figures. He has spiritual powers over weather and sickness and blesses warriors when they go raiding. He commands much respect among the Turkana.

### *Indigenous conflict management*

A participant, an elder in the Kebele, stated: "The peace that we want is the peace we make with them (Turkana) and not that of the government; the peace we make by ourselves is the best peace." During the discussion, a story of a young girl with a feather on her head emerged from the past. It first surfaced in the debate around clans. An agro-pastoralist stated:

A young girl comes from a family that has not killed a Turkana, is free from any blame, has no issues with others, and has not married. When the Dassanech takes the girl there, the Turkana also bring a girl. After identifying this girl, a man from *Turinyeri* (clan) will direct the girl to go. That peace where the girl will go will be a peace that will last (October 21, 2023).

As the story was recounted, the researcher further inquired about the significance of this tradition.

A female farmer weighed in:

The last peace I used to see and hear is when they take a small girl and put an ostrich feather on her head; then they take her to the place where they make peace. She is put in some way as a sign of peace. This young girl can be from any clan and has not been married. A small girl before this was used to get that lasting peace. Because of this girl, there is a lasting peace (October 21, 2023).

The lady insisted on telling the whole story concerning the girl:

After that, the other community will come to the Dassanech, and they will sleep in the Dassanech community. The Dassanech young girl is taken to a place of meeting. They will go to the meeting place and the Turkana to see her. Whenever the Turkana will see her, they will be happy. And she will return (on October 21, 2023).

For Turkana, two elements synonymous with Indigenous conflict management were expressed: security and protection. These two sub-themes suggest that informal social structures create the security and protection needed to live in a conflict environment. The community's very existence is bound by the security and safety offered through the structures.

The people in the *kraal* rely on the meeting of the headmen, on the information from the herders to protect them, and on the alerts given in case of danger. In support of this mode of passing information, a housewife and woman leader stated, "The elders in the *kraal* meeting also tell women to escort the animals to the grazing and water points." Lokai, a herder, confirmed this situation, saying, "Previously I could tell children to graze animals, the women to fetch water, but nowadays when peace broke down, everybody is escorted, women are escorted to fetch water with a gun, children escorted to graze animals with a gun." The community's social organisation relies on social roles to provide instruction and advice daily.





### Spiritual and cultural beliefs

The research data shows that the Dassanech *Kebele*, the figure of the *Maafierich*, is a spiritual person with spiritual powers. Therefore, the researcher could not interview the *Maafierich* during the data collection phase since they were absent but managed to interview his wife. The results established that the role of the *Maafierich* is closely associated with that of the *Maanane*, as expressed by a community leader:

It is also just like *Maanane*. For example, whenever somebody marries a girl from another village, and the parents don't want this, people disagree on marriage. When he (the *Maafierich*) goes there and talks to them, they will respect him. He is respected if anybody runs to his house; no one can get there. He is elected, and there is something that they make out of horns, which is in his house. He blows the horn (October 19, 2023).

A police reservist, who was a and participant, stated that "[the] *Maafierich*'s role in the village is that he resolves internal issues." During the interviews, people spoke about running to the house of the *Maafierich* for protection. Another participant explains this scenario: "When people have a fight, and the wife runs away, and he (husband) is chasing her, and if she runs to the house of the *Maafierich*, he will turn back. He is like a priest; his family is always peaceful people."

In Turkana, rituals are performed by the *Emuron*. A participant stated that "He [*Emuron*] speaks to God and tells people that rain is coming or there will be war or peace, the rituals that they do is [are], talk to people and tell them to take a white goat and slaughter and there will be rain." In addition, as narrated by a peace actor, "When there is sickness, [the] *Emuron* does ritual such as smearing [the sick] with blood or intestines for a cure." He added, "When animals are dying, he [*Emuron*] also assists to perform a ritual to end the dying of animals. He can heal someone without going to the hospital." Another participant stated, "They [*Emuron*] normally call people to gather and start doing rituals like killing the bulls; they pray to God together [for] both youth, old people and everyone. They call, sit together, and praise God together for the rain to be." From the informants, it is clear that *Emuron*'s plays a significant role within the community, especially among youth. Concerning the role of *Emuron* in conflict management, a participant added, "The *Emuron* did ritual for peace a long time ago when they did it to Nang'atom and Toposa and also at Merikuka to the Danassech, and they had a peace."

### Results

This study aimed to answer the question of how informal organisational structures in pastoral communities contribute to conflict management. It highlights the dynamics of the social structures of the Dassanech and the Turkana living in proximity to each other. These structures can enhance the understanding of the community through their roles, power, and legitimacy, leading to knowledge of the capabilities to manage conflict. The structures influence conflict management and interventions, and that very structure profoundly influences people's behaviours and attitudes regarding their responsibilities and subsequent actions.

The social structure of the Dassanech community has a significant number of individuals who hold very well-defined social roles. These were outlined as the *Maanane*, *Maafierich*, *Maaurama*, *Maabierich*, and the *Maajalaba*. They form a reference point in conflict management, among other issues, for the rest of the community. Among the five, the *Maanane* is the authority in the *Kebele* - he communicates with its leaders, adjudicating and resolving issues and giving directions to other *Kebele* leaders. The *Maafierich*, *Maaurama*, *Maabierich* and the *Maajalaba* support him. The five personalities, therefore, guide and play significant roles among the Dassanech. Their positions are critical within the social structures of this community. They act as the link between the Dassanech and the Turkana. In so doing, they are essential in sustainable peace involving the Dassanech and the Turkana.

For the Turkana, the headman is the point of reference who advises and settles disputes. He is first and foremost the headman of his *Kraal*, but in the cluster of *Kraals*, a single headman is selected



mainly due to his age, experience as a warrior when he was younger, and the wealth seen in his herds. His decisions are sometimes influenced by the *Emuron*, who, through rituals, can implore spiritual powers. Evidence from the data shows that the role of the *Emuron* is diminishing but should be considered. Today, the headman is seen within the structure as the contact between the government and the community.

In the Dassanech community, each role player within this structure manages internal and external conflicts to varying degrees. This implies that the social structure is adaptable and can address various types of conflict, whether from individual thoughts, emotions, behaviour, or external sources such as relationships, work environments, or societal pressure. In contrast, there are less specific individualised roles within the structure of the Turkana community. The most prominent people within the Turkana community are the headmen and the *Emuron*. However, the responsibilities of both structures (of the Dassanech and the Turkana) are similar. Both informal community structures, within their respective communities, deal with the daily disputes that must be resolved. They also respond to conflicts between each other, which often involve life and death.

Concerning the literature on social structures, before this current study, Gebre (2010) rightly points out that a greater understanding of social organising may lead to a longer and more durable peace in the Ilemi Triangle. In his work, Gebre did not collect data from the Turkana; he suggests that this knowledge of how the communities are structured would offer a different perspective on managing the conflict. Therefore, data in the current study has shed light on the richness of the informal community structures within the Dassanech and the Turkana and highlights the dynamics of social organising, including the persons responsible within the stoical structures. The roles and the individuals performing the different roles lead to homegrown conflict management practices, which are moored in the spiritual nature of the structures (ritual, sacrifice, and persons with spiritual powers) and the cultural beliefs (curse, protection, and magical powers) thereof. By describing the identity, roles, power and legitimacy in this conflict environment, understanding the dynamics of social organising is enriched.

In the absence of regular and sustained policing from the state, the communities police themselves as part of their indigenous conflict management strategies. Therefore, in socially organising themselves through their structures, livelihoods are secured through grazing fields and inter-communal trade. The structures provide security for the communities and are the reference point for guidance, advice, and instructions. Most communities rely on relevant state bodies to make these choices for them. However, in this environment, the structure itself has daily responsibilities, and the leadership of both communities takes on these responsibilities.

The influence of spiritual beliefs is more evident within the Dassanech community than among the Turkana. There are individuals, such as the *Maafierich*, who have spiritual powers, and clans, such as the *Turinyeri* and *Fargar*, who command influence and power through their spiritual powers. These spiritual powers give protection and security to the community. Regarding conflict management, the spiritual powers act as blessings for peace and protection from the enemy. These are long-held beliefs and traditions of the people on both sides. From both communities, stories of the girl with the ostrich feather emerged and how the blessing from the *Maafierich* and the *Emuron* was essential in the subsequent rituals.

The findings of this research suggest that external stakeholders, including the government, may need to be made aware or may choose to overlook these practices. Magic, ritual, and sacrifice may not fit formal conflict management frameworks. However, the findings suggest a relationship between a conflict management framework and ritual, blessing, and sacrifice. This is confirmed in the findings by the theme of cultural peace, a long-lasting peace made amongst the communities and accompanied by traditional practices of blessings and rituals. The findings demonstrate that the inability of external actors, including the state and NGOs, to understand and respect these



traditional and informal roles within the indigenous conflict management practices and the influence of culture and spiritual powers contribute to hindering peace efforts in the Ilemi Triangle.

### **Conclusion**

In responding to whether informal community structures contribute to sustainable conflict management, there is compelling evidence that the social roles within the structures are functional and influential. Specific functions are designated to different roles, and each role, through its respective tasks, creates the system that manages the community. The findings of this research outline this structure and the roles and responsibilities of these well-known individuals within each community. According to the findings, Indigenous conflict management strategies include identifying the routes to the grazing areas, when to fetch water and when not, and how to respond to conflict with the other community. The decisions made create strategies that provide security for the community and are the reference points for guidance, advice, and instructions.

The findings revealed the spiritual and cultural nature of the structure manifested in ritual and sacrifice. Both communities have identified individuals or clans with spiritual powers that they rely on. These spiritual powers give protection and security to the community. Regarding conflict management, they act as blessings for peace and protection from the enemy. These are long-held beliefs and traditions of the people on both sides. A deeper understanding of the informal structure of the community reveals a treasure trove of knowledge and experience from within the community. The research strongly advocates this wealth of community knowledge to be acknowledged by other stakeholders in the field, such as local and international NGOs. This recognition is a legitimate method of resolving and creating sustainable conflict management, demonstrating respect and consideration for the community's wisdom. There is a wealth of knowledge that unites people, protects them, and can be shared to form conflict management led by the people. Governments and external actors, such as NGOs, churches, and local peace initiatives, should consider this aspect in creating a sustainable conflict management framework.

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