



CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS AND TRADITIONS IN PASTORALIST SOCIETIES: NEGLECTED POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Introduction

Border regions in the Horn of Africa are rife with pastoralist conflicts that usually include tit-for-tat cattle raids, thefts and revenge killings. These sometimes escalate into widespread violence, resulting in the mass displacement of people, reduced access to pasture and water and decreased livelihoods. Cultural traditions and customary institutions feature significantly in conflict initiation and resolution. As a result, efforts to encourage and employ these institutions in conflict prevention and resolution programmes present an

opportunity to achieve more sustainable peace by utilising internal cultural factors. This article reviews the dynamics of pastoralist conflicts, using case examples of how cultural traditions and customary institutions can contribute to successful conflict resolution.

Above: Four members of a local peace committee of the Dassanech tribe in Ethiopia.



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Dynamics of Conflict among Pastoralist Societies

Pastoral groups in the Horn of Africa tend to live in resource-scarce environments with poor infrastructure and minimal access to markets.¹ Most groups share basic subsistence patterns with varying dependency upon agriculture to supplement livestock production. Although some populations are highly transhumant with villages frequently relocating, more commonly only a segment of a society relocates seasonally with herds, while the remaining members live in semi-permanent villages. Livestock usually forms the basis of economic integration with markets and provides the majority of income received, either through selling livestock or by-products such as butter. At the same time, livestock possess enormous cultural value. Not only are they necessary for bride-wealth payments, they also form the basis for important rituals in many societies in the region.

Although pastoralists occupy a broad range of cultural niches, the underlying behavioural dynamics and consequences of conflict are similar across groups. The majority of small-scale conflicts are conducted by young males. These usually involve tit-for-tat cattle raids, thefts or revenge killings. These cycles may escalate into conflicts involving hundreds or thousands of warriors, which result

in the mass displacement of people and the creation of vast depopulated buffer zones between groups. For instance, among the Turkana of northern Kenya, over 40% of the area is estimated to be uninhabited because of conflict between the Turkana and other groups such as the Pokot,² while in Ethiopia, the agro-pastoral Mursi traditionally have a buffer zone between 40 and 50 km wide.³ These buffer zones make conflict less likely by increasing the spatial distances between groups. However, uninhabited buffer zones also

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For pastoral groups, livestock usually forms the basis of economic integration with markets and provides the majority of income received, as well as possessing significant cultural value.

contribute to decreased resource availability through the reduction of accessible pasture and water.

Although the importance of natural resource scarcity as a contributor to conflict is frequently stressed, cultural factors have a significant role in conflict initiation and escalation.⁴ Among pastoralist groups, the two most significant cultural factors that motivate individuals to participate in conflict are strong norms of revenge in which grievances demand compensation or revenge and a desire for status that may accompany successful raids. For instance, among the Dassanech of south-west Ethiopia and northern Kenya, men go to war because of 'debt', which includes the desire for revenge, and 'jealousy', in which men seek to emulate others who have received recognition for being brave in warfare.⁵ Similarly, a well-known Nyangatom warrior related in an interview: "I never fought until the Kara [neighbouring group] came to take my cattle. Now I will not wait for them."⁶

The social recognition individuals receive for conflict participation can be enormous. Successful warriors may receive honorific chest scars denoting kills, be entitled to a new name indicating their success in war, wear special insignia, have songs sung about them, and gain the respect of their peers. At the same time, females and elders may also encourage raids by teasing or mocking individuals

to participate in conflict, especially if there has been an unavenged raid against their group.

Pastoralist cultures also have customary or traditional institutions that are employed in conflict, though there is a significant diversity between cultures. Some societies have highly structured customary institutions, such as the *Gada* and *Heer* systems in the Oromo and Somali ethnic groups respectively. The *Gada* system among the Oromo organises males into sets based on age, in which each set has certain responsibilities. The *Heer* system among the Somali refers to traditional jurisprudence employed to resolve conflicts within and between clans. Formal institutions such as these can be utilised to incite or resolve conflict. Other pastoralist groups have less formal customary institutions, such as those among the Nyangatom of Ethiopia and South Sudan and the Turkana of northern Kenya, which involve the intervention of significant ritual leaders and elders that perform blessings and engage in discussions to resolve conflict.

Across groups, customary institutions generally continue to have an important role in both the initiation and resolution of conflict. For instance, young men may seek the permission of elders before raiding, and large conflicts usually require the sanction and blessing of ritual leaders before their initiation. In some instances, elders may incite



Kenyan police officers patrol during a search mission to find the remains of police officers killed by alleged Turkana cattle rustlers in an ambush, near Baragoi in the north-western Samburu district of northern Kenya (November 2012).

youth to participate in conflict, recounting tales of their own bravery when they were youth. Elders and ritual leaders are also important for conflict prevention and resolution. Informally they may try to restrain youth from raiding, and formally may be signatories to peace agreements.

Cultural Structures and Mechanisms for Peace

Many peace initiatives focus on external conflict triggers such as resource scarcity or market integration, while leaving aside the cultural factors that contribute to conflict. Although this may reduce the likelihood of conflict developing, it ignores the important underlying causes of conflict. In this section, case examples are used to show how cultural factors can be employed for conflict resolution.

Revenge, Compensation and Peace Accords

Many pastoralist societies have strong norms of revenge that are primarily responsible for escalating cycles of violence. In cases of theft, injury or death, there may be significant cultural pressure for youth to engage in revenge attacks. Escalating conflicts are frequently mediated by external actors, and these sometimes result in the establishment of a peace accord between the conflicting parties. However, for accords to be successful, they need

to be binding upon individuals who may otherwise desire revenge. To enable this, the underlying cultural norms for revenge should be addressed. This can be successfully accomplished with compensation for grievances in addition to – or in place of – rule of law sanctions, which frequently do not satisfy underlying cultural norms for revenge. When rule of law sanctions are employed without compensation, they may escalate conflict, because revenge may then be targeted against the offender's family, or the offender may be subject to revenge upon their release from state confinement.

The employment of compensation as the backbone of successful peace accords is demonstrated by the Maikona Declaration between the Borena and Gebra in the Oromo regions of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya.⁷ Elders from both groups were party to the agreement stipulating amounts of compensation to be paid in cases of theft, injury

LIKEWISE, THE INCLUSION OF TRADITIONALLY EXCLUDED ACTORS, SUCH AS FEMALES, MAY PROVIDE AN IMPORTANT MEANS THROUGH WHICH PEACE CAN BE PROMOTED



Nyangatom elders in Ethiopia discuss how to manage conflict with the Turkana.

or death. For instance, if an individual steals an animal from a member of another group that is party to the declaration, that individual or his family then pays five livestock in compensation. This requirement of compensation reduces internal cultural pressure for revenge by providing a clear alternative that satisfies these norms without violence. At the same time, it creates a disincentive to initiate conflict because of the likelihood of being required to pay compensation. Since this agreement was implemented in 2009 there has been a dramatic decrease in conflict deaths, primarily due to the absence of revenge attacks resulting from the payment of compensation. In a similar way, conflict resolution agreements will be more effective if they can satisfy internal cultural pressures that contribute to violence.

Engaging Elders

Elders have an important role in conflict initiation and resolution, and their support is crucial for any successful conflict resolution intervention. Among many pastoralist societies in the South Omo area of Ethiopia, elders formally give their blessings before youth engage in conflict. As one important elder told youth to encourage them to fight: “When I was young, I was fighting all the time, I even

slept in the river to catch the enemy. You youth only sit here in the village and you do not fight. No one will respect you.”⁸

Conflict resolution can successfully utilise the social power elders wield by incorporating them into peace processes. For this to happen, elders should understand the harm resulting from conflict and be committed to peace. Efforts to incorporate elders have been successful among the Nyangatom in south-west Ethiopia. At a peace meeting in 2007, several Nyangatom elders agreed no longer to bless youth who were going to war. Consequently, raiding participation decreased because youth are no longer socially sanctioned by elders. The neighbouring Kara and Dassanech also provide examples. Among the Dassanech, over 150 youth were preparing to go to war and the elders received notice of their plans. Older age sets, including the elders, joined together in beating the young men with sticks to make them cancel their plans.⁹ Among the Kara of the South Omo region of Ethiopia, a group of 40 young men were preparing to raid the neighbouring Nyangatom. Word reached the elders and they were able to convince the youth to abandon their plans.¹⁰

By engaging elders in the peace process and identifying elders committed to peace, it is possible to create internal



Dassanech youth and women of Ethiopia discuss the importance of women's blessings for conflict.

pressure against conflict, especially those initiated by youth without the consent of elders.

Customary Institutions and Flexibility for Conflicts

Customary institutions have varying degrees of formality and have significant potential to contribute to conflict resolution, especially when they can be adapted to fit the particularities of given conflicts. For example, in the ongoing conflict between the Suri and Dizi of south-west Ethiopia, customary institutions were employed in a novel way to address their conflict. The Dizi identified hunger and lack of resources experienced by the Suri as a principle cause of the conflict. In preparation for a peace meeting between the two groups in 2010, the most significant ritual elder of the Dizi instructed other elders to bring three plants to the upcoming peace meeting including a coffee bush, *ensete* (false banana) and *godere* (taro root). When the Suri arrived, the Dizi greeted them with these plants, with the intention that the Suri would plant and harvest these gifts and enjoy the resulting food security. At a minimum, it was a significant goodwill gesture – but, more importantly, this gesture, based on the customary use of ritual leaders for negotiations, addressed one of the root causes of the conflict.

Customary institutions have been employed with similar flexibility between the Borena and Gebra along the Kenyan/

Ethiopian border. Here, the Gebra generally inhabit the Kenyan side of the border, while the Borena inhabit the Ethiopian side in an administrative area known as Dire. During certain seasons, the primary pasture and water is on the Kenyan side of the border and both groups graze livestock on the Kenyan side. During other times of the year, resources are more abundant north of the Ethiopian border and both Gebra and Borena graze livestock there. Formerly, the Gebra and Borena engaged in bitter conflicts in which they did not share resources. They have now utilised a traditional system of resource sharing called *seera margaafi bishaanii* (rules of grazing lands and water points), which employs concepts of neighbourliness and resource access in periods of scarcity. Under this arrangement, in times of scarcity either group is allowed to utilise grazing and water resources in the area where it is available without hindrance. This appears to reduce the stress that results from resources as a conflict trigger.

Cultural Values and the Power of Rhetoric

Because much of the impetus to participate in conflict comes from internal cultural values, these provide an important means to dampen conflict potential, particularly through efforts to encourage values that promote peace. This can happen in any of a number of ways, including

educational programmes, decisions by a certain segment of society to promote non-violent values, or through gradually changing social norms.

Rhetoric can be potentially inflammatory to conflicts, especially when it encourages revenge against a certain ethnic group. Borena members of Megado Kebele in Dire Woreda, Ethiopia, explained how they have tried to change their rhetoric so as not to inflame conflict. As one informant stated: "Previously when someone killed someone, we would say 'a Gebra killed a Borena, or a Borena killed a Gebra'. Now we do not talk like that. We try to say 'a bad person killed someone'. In this way, the people that hear this do not think of revenge and it does not encourage ethnic conflict."¹¹

Changing cultural values are also important. In the Dillo administrative area of southern Ethiopia, the local women's affairs officer is engaged in a campaign to promote non-violent values among females. One of the traditions in this region is for females to sing songs encouraging men to go to war. Sometimes, these songs are highly inflammatory and contribute to an escalation of conflict. The women's affairs officer visits various villages in the area, conducting workshops with women where they discuss conflict and the ways that women can contribute to peaceful resolution. During these workshops, women are encouraged to create songs praising peaceful values. In this case, cultural traditions are not supplanted but modified towards the promotion of peace.

The Dassanech of southern Ethiopia also provide an example of how females can contribute to the peace process. Among the Dassanech, there is a custom that females provide males going to conflict with beads to honour their participation. Males wear these with pride. However, females who have participated in the peace process and become members of local peace committees feel strongly that they should no longer give these beads to warriors. According to one informant: "But now I can no longer give beads, I cannot bless my sons to go to conflict, because I am on the peace committee."¹²

These examples illustrate how cultural values can be utilised for conflict reduction and resolution. Likewise, the inclusion of traditionally excluded actors, such as females, may provide an important means through which peace can be promoted.

Conclusion

Even though conflicts may be "...triggered by an individual, peace can only be re-established communally...",¹⁰ requiring the participation of men, women, elders and youth. Engaging individuals from all sections of society makes conflict resolution more likely, even when formal participation in peace processes may be precluded. Focusing on cultural factors that contribute to conflict, such as customary institutions and traditions and ritual aspects, can reduce the internal cultural pressures for conflict.

Conflict resolution programmes that focus on both cultural factors and the inclusion of members from all sections of society can create conditions such that minor conflicts are unlikely to escalate and are quickly and peacefully resolved. **A**

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Endnotes

- 1 Although there is a broad diversity of pastoralist cultures in this region, this paper seeks to illustrate general trends using data derived from fieldwork among pastoralist groups in Ethiopia and an extensive literature review of ethnographic source materials on pastoralist cultures in east Africa.
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- 12 Dassanech peace committee member (2012) Interview with informant on 13 November. Bubua Kebele, Ethiopia.