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Of Myths and Symbols in the Luo-Nandi Border Conflict in Kenya

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The conflict between the Luo and the Nandi has a long and violent history, which often focuses on political and economic dimensions. This paper instead asks how the conflict between the two communities is kept alive in the lives of ordinary people using myths and symbols. According to folk tales, the Luo and the Nandi have been fighting each other for centuries. The ancient rivalry between the two ethnic communities has been credited to the death of Luanda Magere, an African version analogous to the biblical Samson and Delilah story - which is presented as 'Delilah' from the Nandi community and the 'invincible' Luanda Magere, from the Luo community. After Luanda Magere's death a cloud of mistrust and ethnic rivalry loomed over the two communities.

Myths and symbols are so powerful in identity-based conflicts because they cannot be understood purely from a rational perspective. It is founded on a certain image, identity, a pattern that has to be replicated continuously in the lives of those that live it. Among the Nandi community it emerged that there was a strong belief that all cows belonged to them. It was connected to circumcision and marriage – rites of passage from childhood to

adulthood. The more cattle one had, the more respect and stature a person had. The Nandis viewed the Luos as a fishing community who should not focus on cattle rearing. In a subtle way, the narratives from each community's cultural heritage project myths and symbols as a function of symbolic thinking. This is due to the fact that the myth-symbol complex is pegged on the language that is used to justify certain actions. The historical grievance held by the Nandis over the loss of ancestral land which is currently inhabited by Luos is brought out in the language used and lack of trust between the two communities. Each time a conflict erupted in the Muhoroni Sub County, reference to land was made. And rightly so, because the towns in Muhoroni had and still have Nandi names.

As in the case of the border conflict between the Luo and Nandi, myths are lived experiences that are ever present in the lives of these communities. They morph and gain new meaning each time it is used rather than being static and rigid in structure. Myths evolve with current societal dynamics collectively or individually shaping the people's imaginations and actions by extension. This is grounded on the premise that myths and symbols are fundamental features of the cultural foundations of any ethnic community, objectified as language, naming of places and people, initiation rituals (Luos – the removal of six lower teeth and the Nandi, the cutting of the ears) as well as stereotypes.

Symbols and myths can either serve to bring diverse ethnic communities together or draw them further away from each other. Among the Luo and Nandi, symbols and myths reinforce cleavages

between the two ethnic communities. Both communities firmly believe that myths and symbols play an important role in strengthening their ethnic identity because it enforces connectivity to cultural roots which they take pride in. For example, the Nandi place high value on land and cattle which they are willing to fight for. Donnan and Wilson (2001) refer to this as “sites and symbols of power.” The fight for these symbols of power play out in the current conflict dynamics as the Nandi feel that their land was unfairly taken from them. The Luo community was settled in the region as part of a settlement scheme through corporate societies after independence. Parcels of land within the current Nandi County were also bought by Luos from Tanzania who did not believe in the concept of Ujamaa (African Socialism). Therefore, the ‘encroachment’ of Luos into Nandi territory and the colonial misfortune which forced Nandis out of their ancestral land to make way for the construction of the railway in 1902 and Indian farms in the fertile regions, is a symbol of the loss of their most valued symbol of power, land. The railway line, therefore, became a symbolic marker because it forced many Nandis from Tinderet to Muhoroni to leave their ancestral land. For the Luo community, the railway line became a symbol of division of land between the two communities.

Of noteworthy mention is that myths do not always have a direct correlation to ‘truths’ or ‘facts.’ Rather a complex interaction and amalgamation of remembering, forgetting certain bits of the original myth and interpreting it which involves viewing myths as a source of ethnic past. For example, among the Nandi, cattle raids are part of their culture. It is widely agreed in the community that during the cattle raids, homesteads are never destroyed. This has

not been the norm in recent cattle raids, where homesteads and farms/plantations have been torched. The culture to some extent is being criminalized. Women and children were also never killed during the raids. However, now it has all changed. Women and children are killed without concern. Interpretation of myths regarding a community's culture can therefore be reinvented and manipulated to perpetuate a certain agenda of certain interest groups.

Moreover, what is subjective to the parties in the conflict is that some events must have taken place to provide the grist for the narrative; however, not all parts of these events are automatically preserved in current-day ethnic memory. Some aspects of cultural history may be forgotten or denied. To purchase land there must have been a willing seller. This dimension is not brought out in the narratives and stereotypes projected by both communities. In any case, what is remembered of the past through the myths and symbols is interpreted, steeped with meaning, which may not have been part of the experience of events at the time of its happening. Therefore, the memory of the myth or the meaning of the myth may vary in the present in considerable ways. This can be credited to interests and circumstances of the present. The myth of Luanda Magere is such an example. According to the myth, the Luo and the Nandi were traditional enemies who fought often. Luanda Magere was a powerful Luo warrior who led the tribe in fighting the Nandi's who staged constant raids on their cattle. The cattle raids between the two communities tore the curtains of peace making them sworn enemies. The Nandis sought to find the secret of his strength to no success as his body was made of stones, 'Luanda'. No retreat, no surrender was the motto used by the

Nandi during wars. The Nandi used poisonous arrows which deflected when they hit Luanda's body. After a series of defeats, the Nandi decided to hatch a plan to neutralize the Luo warrior. Luanda Magere was to be given a beautiful Nandi girl endowed with big hips as a peace offering. The Nandi girl was given a task to find out the source of Luanda's strength. The Luo elders were not comfortable with the offer of a bride for Luanda from the Nandi community, but Luanda did not heed the advice of the elders. Luanda's Nandi bride discovered that the source of his strength was his shadow and he would die if his shadow was pierced with a spear. She went back to her community and revealed his secret. The Luo elders did not expect any raids from the Nandi after the peace deal was sealed through marriage. However, the Nandi elders were reading a different script. The Nandis initiated a war with a clear goal in mind, neutralization of Luanda. They pierced his shadow and he was fatally wounded. His body turned into a rock, found in present day Muhoroni Sub County. So, what are the chances of these two ethnic communities with such symbolic past and metaphors that divide, live peacefully?

In a bid to address some historical grievances, the interpretation of myths and symbols can be changed in light of recent developments. In the region, cattle raids have now been criminalized. In the culture and tradition of Nandi, this myth has been used to justify cattle raids. A man could not move into his own house or marry without having cows in his homestead. The Nandis have held that because Luanda Magere did not pay dowry for the Nandi bride brought to him as a peace offering, they should take cattle from the Luo community. The myth has now been used

to justify crime of cattle rustling, both communities being actively engaged in stealing cattle from each other. Myths and symbols should, therefore, not be overlooked in conflict management. It is within that framework that traditional means of conflict management can be employed to address conflict. One such powerful depiction of this is the *ng'ado guok* (dog cutting) ritual which took place in Kibigori. It involved cutting a black dog in half as a sign that a curse would befall a person or community which broke the peace deal between the Luos and the Nandi. To date, no cattle rustling takes place in that area between the two communities. Traditional means of conflict management, therefore, has a place as long as communities are deeply rooted in their culture.

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