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POLICY BRIEF

Kenya-Uganda Lokiriama Peace Accord

Lessons from an unwritten agreement

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The 1973 Lokiriama Peace Accord marked the start of a positive relationship between Kenya's Turkana and Uganda's Matheniko communities. This unwritten indigenous conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanism favours consensus-building and reconciliation, making it more useful in post-conflict peacebuilding than contemporary punishment- and enforcement-focused approaches. While many other agreements in the region have faltered, this accord, with its culturally relevant, community-centred approach to settling disputes and restoring social order, still holds.

Key findings

- The Lokiriama Peace Accord has withstood the test of time for being a model community-centred and culturally sensitive borderlands peace agreement.

- Traditional conflict resolution and peacebuilding is local, cost-effective, convenient, flexible, and respected. It can promote peaceful coexistence without coercion, and delivers mutually beneficial outcomes.

- It is easy to reconcile communities that have ancestral, lingual and cultural affinity if the search for peace is situated within the structure, norms and values of their social institutions.

- Modern conflict resolution and peacebuilding approaches alone cannot bring positive and durable peace among the Karamoja Cluster communities.

- The diminishing power of traditional governance institutions, particularly elders, threatens centuries-old traditional conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms among communities.

- The Lokiriama Peace Accord is a model that can be replicated not only in the Karamoja Cluster but in the pastoral borderlands of the greater East and Horn of Africa.

- Peace actors' failure to replicate and strengthen the Lokiriama Peace Accord has made other communities vulnerable to insecurity.

Recommendations

Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia's governments:

- Work with community elders to adopt culturally sensitive, traditionally binding, context-specific peacebuilding approaches.

- Replicate Lokiriama as a model agreement among warring communities.

- Scale up human security programming to bring development closer to the people and help communities diversify livelihoods.

- Jointly curb illegal weapons through a coordinated disarmament exercise involving community elders regionwide.

- Map out and build capacity of traditional conflict resolution structures.

Non-state peace actors:

- Promote civic education around non-violent peacebuilding.

- Conceptualise, design and implement a community-sensitive conflict resolution and peacebuilding approach borrowing from the Lokiriama agreement.

- Embrace human security programming to divert livelihoods from pastoralism.

- Map out and build capacity of traditional conflict resolution structures in coordination with relevant peace actors.

Local communities:

- Traditional elders should enforce community peace agreements.

- They should use their authority and influence to de-escalate tension, resolve conflicts, and promote intercommunal understanding.

- Engage women and youth in conflict resolution forums.

- Develop intergenerational succession arrangements for implementation and sustenance of community peace accords.

Introduction

The Lokiriama Peace Accord, a product of traditional conflict resolution and peacebuilding, continues to foster lasting peace between Kenya's Turkana and Uganda's Matheniko communities.[1]

In the rugged terrain of the sleepy old town of Lokiriama stands a monument to this peace agreement. It rises as a symbol of hope for lasting peace among pastoralists, where the struggle for survival often pits communities against each other.

The December 1973 peace deal was created by the elders of Uganda's Matheniko and Kenya's Turkana communities. The two communities have more that unites them than divides them – including persistent drought exacerbated by climate change. However, despite the years of truce between the two communities, the Karamoja Cluster continues to experience deadly intercommunal conflict.

Conflict among communities with competing needs isn't a recent phenomenon, and the conflict dynamics among Karamoja Cluster pastoralist communities are not unique. In traditional African societies, informal structures perform various functions, including conflict resolution and peacebuilding. These structures are effective when aligned with the traditions and customs of affected communities.[2]

Traditional approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding help contextualise the history of community relations and provide a platform for social reconciliation. This peacemaking process provides an understanding that can help rebuild severed trust among communities and restore a foundation for communal coexistence.[3]

In traditional African society, individuals belong to a community, which makes the culture of resolving conflict effective and respected. Community elders broker peaceful settlement of disputes, with the outcome of such negotiations binding on all parties to the conflict.[4]

Historical kinship affinity and past communal interaction also influence community decisions, and to this end, no community is seen as an enemy of another. In the context of the pastoralist communities living in the Karamoja Cluster, livestock raids are seen as 'normal' insecurity challenges that can be resolved by elders through negotiations.

In modern-day settings, conflict resolution and peace-building have been delegated to local administrators and selected community representatives. Such meetings often deploy high-level interventions that focus on bringing together leaders of the parties to the conflict based on the assumption that they indeed represent the communities they come from.[5]

In this regard, peace processes have mostly excluded those affected by the conflict, leading to unresolved grievances, rendering outcomes inefficient. Traditional elders have lost the power to summon the offenders to the police, who, representing the state, are mandated to present the suspects to the courts.

The Karamoja Cluster faces severe environmental challenges due to persistent drought, worsened by climate change

The modern court system focuses on judgment and not conflict resolution, leaving many wounds open,[6] and leading to a culture of revenge. This goes against traditional conflict resolution approaches that stress reconciliation.[7]

This policy brief provides an understanding of the effectiveness of traditional approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms in the Karamoja Cluster. The 1973 accord has withstood the test of time – proving that peace accords aligned with people's traditions can remain relevant for generations.

Background

The Karamoja Cluster is the geographically shared area between the borders of Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia. It is inhabited by speakers of the Ateker language group, including the Turkana (Kenya), Karimojong (Uganda), Nyangatom (South Sudan), and Merille (Ethiopia).[8]

The area faces severe environmental challenges due to persistent drought, worsened by climate change.[9] These environmental changes have fuelled competition over water and pasture resources, exacerbating conflicts among pastoralist groups.

Furthermore, the distance from the seat of power in the capitals and economic marginalisation have led to non-state groups emerging and exploiting the state's absence in the region by supplying arms and ammunition and promoting cattle rustling.

Traditionally, community elders have been central to intercommunal peacebuilding processes. They established rules and sanctions for sharing resources such as pasture and water. They further sanctioned cattle raiding and oversaw the protection of women, children and the elderly during cattle raids.

The ownership of arms by young warriors is viewed as a symbol of masculinity, wealth accumulation, and protection

Colonialism disrupted these traditional peace structures, sidelining community elders in intercommunal peacebuilding processes. Cattle raids have become more devastating in terms of life and livestock losses, and community peacebuilding structures are increasingly unable to quell the violence.

Livestock raiding has therefore become a key way for youth and illicit businesspeople to acquire wealth and status. The acquisition and ownership of arms by young warriors is now viewed as a symbol of masculinity, wealth accumulation, and protection. This has increased violence and the illicit acquisition of arms for cattle raiding.

Community elders are regarded as the custodians of peace. They also have the power to sanction raids against 'enemy' communities, and to invoke blessings and curses. But their exclusion and local administrators' appointment by colonial powers have disrupted this culture.

Livestock raids and counterraids have remained a way of life in the Karamoja Cluster, allowing young warriors to acquire wealth and status, often contravening the traditional rules of war, which are against total destruction. Young warriors continue to accumulate wealth through gun violence.[10]

These compounded challenges have increased insecurity in the Karamoja Cluster – where survival often hinges on strength and aggression.

Methodology

Qualitative data collection approaches were deployed to gather the necessary data through questionnaires, key informant interviews, and participant observations. Data collection took place in the Karamoja Cluster, located along the Kenya-Uganda border, in May and June 2024.

The towns visited included Lodwar, Loya, Lokiriama, and Urum (Kenya), as well as Moroto, Kotido, Amudat, and Nakapiripirit districts (Uganda). Using purposive and snowball sampling, respondents, including community leaders, religious leaders, government officials, youth, women and civil society actors, were identified. The study conducted 30 questionnaire interviews and 10 key informant interviews.

Secondary data was obtained through the review of secondary literature, including policy papers, journal articles, newspaper reports, and peace agreements signed in the broader Karamoja Cluster.

Karamoja Cluster conflict dynamics

Conflict in the Karamoja Cluster is increasingly complex, with long-term inter-communal rivalries coupled with negative socialisation and friction among communities. Criminal actors involved in the illicit trade of small arms and light weapons contributing to the commercialisation of cattle rustling have emerged, threatening public safety.

It has also added to insecurity in contested border areas, such as Nadapal and the Mogilla Hills, along the Kenya-South Sudan border. These areas are rich in good grasslands and water resources, and are thus attractive for pastoralists. Violent contestation in these pasture-rich areas has forced communities to converge at critical grazing areas along the border, leading to deadly armed confrontations.[11]

Role of culture

Culture plays an important part in enabling the resolution of disputes and promoting cohesion among communities. Through culture, societies can define the meaning of life and better understand the nature of human relations. Culture defines the values and attitudes that societies choose to embrace. These cultural values and attitudes provide a foundation for social norms by which people live.[12]

In the African context, elders are regarded as custodians of societal norms and institutions. Elders negotiate peace and sanction war by blessing the community warriors. In the traditional set-up of the Karamoja Cluster communities, war is governed by rules, including the protection of women and children during conflict. Warfare is said to be aimed at benefitting the community during scarcity.[13]

Elders are the custodians of culture, passing on traditions and values through generations. However, given the patriarchal nature of the communities living in this region, men hold a dominant position in making decisions. The elders take the lead in peace processes and approve declarations made at community level. They organise dialogues through traditional structures to settle disputes.

Elders buried their tools of war, and entered into a covenant to ensure the two communities' peaceful coexistence

Any discussion whose outcome has some impact on the community must be blessed by the elders, including peace meetings. The strength of elders in mending severed ties among communities lies in their use of negotiations and compensation to settle disputes.

Communities have traditional shrines, regarded as holy, where elders meet to make decisions. These decisions are passed down to community members through their wives and to the warriors through elder representatives. Typically, women don't have a direct role in conflict resolution or peace processes, but they can be engaged by the elders in peacebuilding at the inter-communal level since they are seen as non-threatening. Elders sometimes use women to convey messages of peace and remorse to other communities.[14]

Elders are also responsible for disciplining notorious criminals and those who disrupt peace through issuing summonses and punishment. Culprits must donate a bull, which the elders slaughter as they deliberate the case.

If the person is seen to have reformed, they are allowed back into the community to resume normal life. Those found guilty are either fined or handed over to people of their age group for punishment. If suspects fail to reform, elders impose the most extreme punishment by sanctioning the person as an outcast. This is rare, however.[15]

The community elders convene a meeting at the start of a dry season to deliberate on how to navigate the challenging times ahead. They come together for a feast, and then deliberate on where to take their livestock in search of water and pasture. Once they agree on where to graze their livestock, they relay the information to the local government administrators and dispatch a team of elders to seek consent from the host community.

The elders identify a kraal leader who takes responsibility for maintaining peace while away with the livestock. This local arrangement has helped contain cases of community conflict in the Karamoja Cluster, especially on the Ugandan side.[16]

Elders are tasked with carrying out peace rituals, including spearing a cow to drink its blood, and later killing it and cooking its meat. The rituals, which entail seeking divine intervention from their creator, are usually conducted in a secluded location – at their traditional shrines – far from the homesteads.

They then pray for their community, livestock and land, and a curse is cast on those who break the peace. Rituals are sometimes conducted to cleanse a reformed warrior. The invocation of spirits concludes the rituals, which aim to preserve peace through curses.[17]

Lokiriama Peace Accord

In 1973, after decades of deadly clashes, the Turkana and Matheniko elders in northwestern Kenya and northeastern Uganda respectively met under a tree in Lokiriama, Kenya. In a powerful symbol of peace, they buried their tools of war, including guns and bows and arrows, and entered into a covenant to ensure the two communities' peaceful coexistence.

The accord, named after the remote town of Lokiriama, located along the Kenya-Uganda border, has held for decades. The approach, a departure from the government's primarily military-focused strategy, has been effective.

The agreement was initiated by the Matheniko community in response to the deadly livestock rustling incidents

occurring at the time. The Matheniko elders met and agreed on seeking a truce with their Turkana neighbours in Kenya. The elders dispatched a delegation of young warriors to Turkana to deliver their message of peace.

During this time, Uganda's Tepeth community was at peace with the Turkana, and the Matheniko elders requested that the Tepeth elders provide a safe passage to facilitate conveying their message to the Turkana.[18]

The Tepeth elders agreed, and under the cover of night, they helped the young Matheniko warriors reach a community water point where the Turkana watered their livestock. The next day, the Turkana encountered their 'enemy' at the water point, which caused them significant fear. They raised an alarm that attracted Turkana warriors to the scene.

After the fall of Ugandan president Idi Amin in 1979, the region experienced an influx of illicit firearms

The Turkana elders intervened, urging the warriors not to harm the strangers. The elders later interrogated the 'enemies' who explained that they had been sent by the Matheniko elders to deliver a message of peace. The young warriors revealed the names of the elders who had sent them – names the Turkana elders recognised.

The elders welcomed the young warriors, gave them food, and took them to the local chief. Following further interrogation, the chief took them to the district commissioner in Lodwar, Kenya, where they were escorted to various Turkana clans to convey their message of peace.[19]

Their message was well received, and they were later escorted back to the border to convey the Turkana community's acceptance of peace with the Matheniko. Returning to Uganda, the elders convened a meeting with local administrators present.

This was followed by a briefing of local kraal leaders in the area about the new developments. This information was communicated to senior government officials in Uganda. It was agreed that to build on this success, a meeting of elders would take place in Kenya.[20] The meeting, convened in Lokiriama, Kenya, brought together

elders from the larger Karamoja Cluster communities, and it took weeks to conclude.

At the end of the meeting, traditional rituals were performed where weapons, including knives, bows and arrows, guns and spears, were buried in a pit, animals were slaughtered for a feast, and curses were cast on anyone who dared break the covenant.[21]

In addition to the weapons, razor blades were buried – as they are used to shave the hair of women who have lost husbands in battle.

However, after the fall of Ugandan president Idi Amin in 1979, the region experienced an influx of illicit firearms looted from the Moroto barracks after the military abandoned their positions.

This weakened the peace accord, and soon the region relapsed into conflict.[22] Nonetheless, while other communities have disregarded the peace accord, the Matheniko and Turkana communities, who initiated the process, have continued to abide by the treaty. Among other reasons, this is also largely out of fear of the curses cast by the elders.[23]

Key lessons from the accord

- The agreement is testament to the importance of local ownership of the process and community participation in promoting reconciliation and lasting peace.

- It shows that a peace process rooted in traditions of the affected communities can last longer than one that is not.

- The curses and sanctioning powers of the elders, as well as the symbolic burying of weapons, demonstrate the role of culture in cementing community relations and promoting lasting peace among warring communities.

- A genuine search for peace, blended in the traditions and values of affected communities, can promote lasting peace among the parties to the conflict.

- The meeting of community elders and government's support, which culminated in the Lokiriama Peace Accord, affirms the complementarity of the role of government and traditional elders in promoting peaceful coexistence among warring communities.

- Bringing the peace process closer to affected communities will provide all parties to the conflict with

an opportunity to participate, especially the community warriors, who are often overlooked but are an important target group in a genuine search for lasting peace.

- Peace processes in cultural settings increase communities' ownership of the process and reinforce community elders' authority, making the outcome more binding.

- Peace processes anchored in lengthy negotiations between communities with shared values and norms regarding the making of peace and the waging of war are easier to achieve when conducted within traditional structures.

Conclusion

Community structures can repair broken bonds through conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding.[24] The cultural demand for preserving communal bonds facilitates communities' informal discussions and agreements on communal matters.

Modern approaches to peace and conflict resolution, like over-reliance on modern administrators, top-down strategies, police enforcing law and order, and forceful disarmament exercises, can promote only temporary cessations of hostility among communities. They do not yield lasting peace.

The Matheniko and Turkana communities' experiences in Uganda and Kenya show the role of culture in repairing severed bonds among people. This shows that warring communities can coexist in harmony by negotiating peace and resolving conflict.

The traditional approach to conflict resolution can deliver justice, peace and reconciliation through traditionally structured negotiations and mediations with less emphasis on punishment. The Lokiriama Peace Accord has withstood the test of time simply because it empowers communities as the owners of the peace process and traditional elders as the guarantors of peace.

It is against this backdrop that policymakers and peace actors should strengthen traditional institutions at the community level and provide the necessary support to make these institutions function effectively, complementing modern conflict resolution and peacebuilding approaches.

Notes

1   Key informant interview (KII), Lokiriama, Kenya, 9 May 2024.

2   KII, Lodwar, Kenya, 6 May 2024.

3   AJ Ademowo, Conflict Management in Traditional African Society, ResearchGate, September 2015, www.researchgate.net/publication/281749510_Conflict_management_in_Traditional_African_Society.

4   Ibid.

5   T Murithi, African indigenous and endogenous approaches to peace and conflict resolution, Peace and Conflict in Africa, 2008, www.bloomsburycollections.com/monograph-detail?docid=b-9781350221710&tocid=b-9781350221710-chapter2.

6   ACCORD, Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution, Conflict Trends, 11 February 2019, www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/traditional-methods-of-conflict-resolution/.

7   Ibid.

8   K Matthysen et al., The Karamoja Cluster of eastern Africa: Arms transfers and their repercussions on communal security perceptions, https://ipisresearch.be/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/20101231_Karamoja.pdf.

9   Ibid.

10   Ibid.

11   F Okello, Fitting Cattle Rustling in Karamoja Cluster in the Frame of Transnational Organized Crime, Intelligence and Investigation Division, Counter Terrorism Directorate, Uganda Police Force, https://caert.org.dz/Publications/Articles/Article-4-vol-11-1.pdf.

12   T Murithi, African Approaches to Building Peace and Social Solidarity, ACCORD, 25 September 2006, file:///Users/gturi/Downloads/ajol-file-journals_310_articles_39402_submission_proof_39402-3697-49796-1-10-20071213.pdfity.

13   KII, Kotido, Uganda, 28 May 2024.

14   Saferworld, 2020, Peace, security and justice in Karamoja: amplifying the voices of women and girls, www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1293-peace-security-and-justice-in-karamoja-amplifying-the-voices-of-women-and-girls.

15   KII, Moroto, Uganda, 1 June 2024.

16   KII, Moroto, Uganda, 28 May 2024.

17   Ibid.

18   KII, Kotido, Uganda, 28 May 2024.

19   KII, Lokiriama, Kenya, 7 May 2024.

20   Ibid.

21   KII, Moroto, Uganda, 1 June 2024.

22   Ibid.

23   KII, Lodwar, Kenya, 8 May 2024.

24   AJ Ademowo, Conflict Management in Traditional African Society, ResearchGate, September 2015, www.researchgate.net/publication/281749510_Conflict_management_in_Traditional_African_Society.

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