

# Perspectivizing Vernacular Broadcast Media Intervention in Stemming Intra-Ethnic Conflict in Kenya: A Case of the Abakuria

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## Abstract

The media can be used as an instrument to build as well as to destroy order, harmony and social coexistence in the human society. This study has tried to establish the inherent nature of social conflict and crises in human society as well as the significant role of the media and communication in forming and shaping individual or group perception of events or issues, as well as enhancing human interaction. It also perspectivizes the nature of violence and turmoil to the wellbeing of humanity. Vital roles of the media and the various conflict management apparatus like arbitration, collaboration, mediation, negotiation and reconciliation among other measures put in place to avert or control the recurrent violent conflict among the Abakuria community have also been highlighted.

**Keywords:** intra-ethnic conflict, conflict resolution, vernacular broadcast media, Abakuria

## Introduction

It is worth noting that much has been written about conflict<sup>1</sup>, which occurs within the same ethnic group of people<sup>2</sup>, which provide a considerable challenge to regional and local security in Kenya. Intra-ethnic conflict is caused by the interaction of multiple factors which are localized. A sudden structural change, such as collapse of a political and/or economic system, or fight for scarce and ever diminishing resources create a context of instability and general uncertainty about the future, not only in Kenya but globally as well. In this context, ethnic emotions, based on the historical memories of grievances, are revived where institutions lose their capacity to regulate ethnic emotions and relations in a peaceful manner and political entrepreneurs manipulate ethnic groups' emotions/fears of each other to achieve particular political or self-serving goals.

Conflict in most parts of the world has invariably become part of people's lives. In its wake, it has led to massive loss of human lives and usually leaves a trail of destruction to property. Despite the very many shades of conflict that have been experienced in Kenya, the Abakuria ethnic violence is unique as theirs is inter clan .Kungu et al. (2015) says that the Abakuria conflict has become perpetual yet the mechanisms used in managing it have been wanting or downright inadequate due to the fact that they keep recurring, often with disastrous consequences time and again.

According to Kungu, the Abakuria have always had their well established and indigenous mechanism used in managing intra-ethnic or inter-clan conflicts , which is also buttressed by members of the provincial administration, local and international Non-governmental Organizations, Community Based Organizations, Faith Based Organizations, Community Policing members, members of the peace committees , civic leaders, Sub county Security Teams, warriors and community members or victims to previous conflicts.

Conflict in any society is almost inevitable due to the fact that most of them arise out of need for and more desire to acquire and retain resources, yet resources will always be scarce and competition for them will always lead to unequal distribution and anger from those who feel that they have not got their rightful share of it.

There are quite a few studies available of intra-ethnic conflicts in Kenya due to sometimes flimsy reasons (Omulo, 1992; Mulati, 2003; Pablo *et al.*, 2004; Njuguna and Mangi, 2010; Njagi, 2014). However, more of these studies have been reported in the mass media than from basic analytical and empirical study units. The scale of these intra-ethnic conflicts is diverse among each ethnic group.

## Statement of the Problem

Every ethnic community in Kenya often undergoes internal disagreements that may escalate to some level of active conflict. However, in some cases and among some of the ethnic groups, the conflict escalate beyond the just disagreement into full blown conflict. One of the communities where such has been reported is the Abakuria ethnic group. This problem of intra-ethnic differences has been determined to originate from clan factions and

<sup>1</sup>This a terminology that include issues within the same ethnic community, or community speaking the same language but has: dialectal differences, clan differences, or resource use differences (Christem and Mackowitz, 2015)

<sup>2</sup>This is actually intra-ethnic conflicts in general which are not new to human societies; they are as old as human society because they have been in existence in all spheres of human life since the beginning of history (Danny, Breveon and Morrison, 2013).

therefore several consultation meetings, initiatives and camps have been held with the view to fact find and bring lasting peace and harmony among the Abakuria clans as has been noted elsewhere in the thesis. These have brought in governmental as well as non-governmental players such as churches, politicians, NGOs and many others. Several roadmaps have been tabled and resolutions made in regard to peace building, creation of harmony and conflict transformation. The efficiency of these efforts have been variable as they have acted largely as a stop gap and situational efforts that need to be continuously buttressed by more sustained and broad-based approaches to ensure lasting peace among members of the community under study. The efforts have mainly been geared towards fostering coexistence and harmony. The Kenya National Human Rights Commission (KNHRC), The National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), among others have facilitated several consultative meetings which have brought together the local administrators, civic leaders, religious leaders, and political leaders as well.

Although there have been several attempts at resolving the Abakuria conflict, the real scale and magnitude of the conflict rarely gets any prominent coverage in the mainstream national media and coupled with genuine lack of a vernacular mass media forum, these efforts aimed at finding solutions to the conflicts through the mass media approach have yielded very little success.

### **Objectives of the study**

To realise the aim stated in the preceding sub-section, the specific objectives of the study were to:

- i). Determine the source of information from broadcast media and their role in conflict resolution among the Abakuria
- ii). Evaluate the existing broadcast media reportage of intra-ethnic conflict and how they affect intra-ethnic conflict among the Abakuria

### ***Significance of the Study***

This study is going to be beneficial to Kenya and Africa at large. As a country, Kenya has, and continues to experience several conflicts, many of which have persisted for far too long. By their very chronic nature, these conflicts point to a systemic weakness in the current available mechanisms of conflict resolution amongst communities. Evidently, the findings will be useful in coming up with long lasting peace solutions and approaches to dealing with intra-community conflicts.

A better understanding of these conditions would advance our appreciation of conflict dynamics in at least three ways. First, intra-ethnic conflict is an important phenomenon in its own right, generating thousands of deaths and displacements throughout the world. Second, conflict within groups is intimately connected to conflict between groups. Intra-group dynamics such as extremist outbidding and flanking have frequently been noted as some of the largest obstacles to domestic peace in divided societies (Horowitz, 2015).

Additionally, this study will help elucidate the scientific literature on media effects especially about the role of media in intra-ethnic conflicts, which subject has not received much attention from previous media researchers, practitioners and stakeholders.

### ***Study Area***

The study was conducted in Kurialand in Migori County. The generic term Abakuria has been variously used throughout this research. It literally means and purely refers to “The people of Kuria”. The Abakuria are what can be called an ethnic as well as linguistic entity traversing two East African countries. They reside in the Tarime and Serengeti districts of Mara region in Northern Tanzania, and the larger Kuria District which today is divided into Kuria East and Kuria West in Migori County in what was formerly called Nyanza Province in Kenya. However, this study is only applicable to the Abakuria resident in Kenya who straddle the larger Kuria Districts.

Kuria West comprises the Bagumbe and Bakira clans while Kuria East is composed of the Nyabasi and Bwirege clans. According to the census results from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics conducted in the year 2009, Kuria East had a population of 81,883 persons with 13,513 households spread across two divisions of Kegonga and Ntimaru, while Kuria West had a population of 174,293 persons with 28,257 households spread in two administrative divisions of Mabera and Kehancha. Therefore, the study area has a total population of 256,176 with 51,770 households. Subsequently, one sub-location was identified from each location from which the sample population was derived.

### **Research Methodology**

The study used a mixture of survey and qualitative methods of research design. The choice of these methods was influenced by the perceived varying degrees of opinions, views and perception of divergent respondents sampled. Creswell (2009) argues that qualitative research design is suitable in natural settings. Since the study mostly focused on respondents’ perceptions of media and conflict management issues, qualitative approach gave more

room for interpretation and understanding. Strauss and Corbin (1999) have further shown that those who use qualitative research obtain satisfactory results and appropriate answers to the central research questions being investigated. Therefore, this design was chosen because of its usefulness in obtaining an overall picture of the study.

The study used the independent, dependent and intervening variables as the three major variables to help the researcher to analyze and interpret the data. According to Gray (2009), an independent variable is the one used to explain or predict an outcome on the dependent variable; the intervening variable is one that influences the relationship between the observed variables or independent and the dependent variables, while the dependent variable is one that forms the focus of research and depends on independent or explanatory variable. In this study, the independent variable is the approach of media coverage and reporting of intra-ethnic conflict situations.

## **Results and Discussion**

Currently the absence of any form of a formal, indigenous mass medium of communication for the Abakuria is among the key facets lacking to spearhead resolution of their intra-ethnic conflicts. However, generally in Kenya mass media is vibrant in all the spheres of people's lives.

The study evaluated the contemporary vernacular mass media intervention in communities prone to intra-ethnic conflicts. In doing this, the study relied mainly on secondary sources of data by critically analyzing some sample newspapers, radio, television, internet and news agencies reports during the last 2 years in the area of study. The study also relied on some published books and journals to give adequate background to the topic under study. The study also extensively reviewed related and relevant literature on intra-ethnic conflict, and the role of mass media in solving such conflicts. In the process the study discovered gaps yet to be filled which among other things have to do with the role of the media in solving intra-ethnic conflicts and the consequences of media reportage on such.

The study also made a "chance finding" which will be mentioned in passing but must be noted as significant in the context of the study topic and relationship to national security and peace. The study took note of the fact that the whole swathe of Kurialand borders a foreign country, Tanzania. As such, it is in the best security interest of any country that its borders remain secure at all times. The fact that the Kuria borderline is mostly insecure and occasionally volatile presents a real and serious security threat to Kenya as a country and not just Kuria as an ethnic community. As Collier (2015) asserts, a nation whose borders are plagued by intermittent internal strife create within them a very porous borderline that makes attainment of domestic peace a nightmare. Therefore due to the same intra-ethnic conflict obtaining within this border community, the situation too can create a fertile ground for human trafficking, drug trafficking, illegal arms smuggling, illegal immigrants and great instability and lawlessness.

As a background for critical analysis of the role and pattern of media reportage of these conflicts and its effects on the intra-ethnic conflict among the Abakuria community, the study elaborately chronicled and classified the major conflicts that took place between 1990 and 2013 into various categories. The purpose of this was to lay a sound foundation for the analysis of pattern and forms of media coverage in order to ascertain the role of the mass media on the various violent intra-ethnic conflicts under study. While analyzing the mass media reportage of the various intra-ethnic conflicts in the past three decades among the Abakuria, the study found that the media reportage was greatly influenced by ownership, geographical and political-ideological tendencies to the detriment of the ethics guiding the profession to genuinely solve conflicts. It was also discovered that the traditional pattern of viewing and reporting news cannot be adopted by media professionals when reporting intra-ethnic conflicts. In the process it was also revealed that lack of sensitivity in media reportage of intra-ethnic conflicts has adverse effects on the escalation of the conflicts.

The study argues that bearing the influence of the mass media in mind, the media owe certain indisputable obligations to society- such obligations as encouraging the preservation of public peace, morality, and security for any meaningful solutions to intra-ethnic conflicts to take place. The study further argues that the principle of social responsibility is limited when it comes to intra-ethnic conflict reportage which is a relatively new area in journalism practice in Third World Countries.

### **Sources of mass media information to local community members and their perceived roles in conflict resolution among the Abakuria**

There were discernable cases of conflicts among the three categories of respondents.

Higher proportions of the victims of conflicts and media practitioners believed that there were more frequent intra-ethnic conflicts compared to the general public. The most common nature of conflict among the victims was found to be arguments, quarrels, disagreements, deaths and verbal abuses, which were all attested by more than 50% of the victims of conflicts. Other less frequent conflicts based on the responses of the members of public were hostilities and fights that each attracted the attention of less than 30% of the victims of conflicts.

The study has revealed that there is very low presence and contribution of the mass media and media strategy for the prevention, resolution and management of intra-ethnic conflicts. Although conflicts are ubiquitous and perennial among the Abakuria community, media players may not perceive conflicts as a threat, and develop programmes in support of government efforts. Obviously the role of the mass media in the management of the conflict is ad-hoc passive and reactionary. The personnel selected and trained on conflict management with outside support, are powerless and do not make editorial decisions. Those trained are often moved to other beats. As a result, mass media programmes during the conflict were limited to news that are short-lived. There is not enough time for the curious audience to comprehend and internalize messages. The information that finally gets to the public may not be the truth as perceived by the participants to the conflict, owing to the gate keeping function of the media owners. As a result, there was inadequate feedback mechanism between and among the key parties to the conflict.

### **Existing mass media reportage of intra-ethnic conflict and how they have affected intra-ethnic conflict among the Abakuria**

According to Ibukun (1997) explained conflict as difference between two or more parties that results in mutual oppositions. Hence, before a conflict could occur, there must be a group, some contest over an interest and a disagreement. Conflict is therefore, an inevitable phenomenon in any organization including among the victims of conflicts. This study also set to explore the nature of communication used between the victims of conflicts and staff of Abakuria ethnic group aimed at solving the intra-ethnic conflicts interpersonal conflicts. Initial results indicate low frequency of communication between the victims of conflicts and staff during conflicts. Communication among respondents normally entails integrating or linking together people to accomplish a collective set of tasks. Yet, Green and Kreuter (2006) stated that communication mechanisms used by respondents differ in their degree of formality -that is, in their degree of pre-specification, conventionality, and rule-boundedness. Explicit communication among the respondents is therefore necessary in part because individuals within an organization have only partially overlapping goals. Thus, one of the aims of communication is to insure that the disparate individuals come to share the same goals. But even if these aims were achieved, and their goals were identical, the input-output dependencies among individuals require that their efforts be sequenced and interrelated efficiently. In this study there was ample evidence that communication among respondents occurred in Abakuria ethnic group aimed at solving problems of conflict resolution within the area. However, the lower proportions of respondents attesting then existence of communication among them in the phase of several methods of communication points to gloomy picture of low inter-professional communication in solving problems of conflict resolution. Perhaps because of the controversy of identifying cases of physical abuses among the respondents in many countries (Briere and Elliot, 2004; Backer, Rogers and Sopory, 2008), it was difficult for these respondents to effectively communicate information on conflict resolution among themselves. In terms of functional characteristics, formal and informal communication systems seem best suited to different types of activities.

More positively, formal communication is communication that is spontaneous, interactive and rich. Coordination by feedback (Ouellet, 2003), through organismic communication networks (Olguer, 2005), or by clan mechanisms (Northouse and Northouse, 19180) are alternate ways of describing coordination by formal communication. Formation are prepackaged and then shipped intact to a recipient; courses of action are pre-computed and then executed without modification. Information is often exchanged interactively, through meetings and conversations, and courses of action are worked out in the context of the circumstances into which the actions must fit. At the formal end of the dimension, coordination is also accomplished by adherence to common rules, regulations, and standard operating procedures, through pre-established plans, schedules, and forecasts, and through memos, management information reports, and other standardized communications (Morrison and McConnell, 2006).

It has been generally agreed that the nature of the communication influences the formality of communication in it (Mirabits and Morgenstein, 1990). In conveying message by the respondents, written forms of communication were found to be common with some differences noted among the respondents on the modes of conveying the information on conflict resolution to the other respondents. It has also been noted that forms of communication itself may partially determine the formality of a communication event.

When communicating conflict resolution information, most of the respondents outwards and upwards dimensions perhaps because of its ability to reach more of the targeted audience (Malcome, 1994; Mirabits and Morgenstein, 1990; Lent, 2004; L'Engle *et al.*, 2006; Morrison and McConnell, 2006). At the heart of what is termed term outward dimension of communication is its *ad lib* nature. Conversations take place at the time, with the participants, and about the topics at hand. None of these characteristics - timing, participants, or agenda - is scheduled in advance during outward mode of communication. Moreover, during its course the communication changes to take into account the participants' current interests and understandings. In this sense, communication is truly interactive but initiated by the professional, with all participants in the communication being able to

respond to what they perceive to be the current state of affairs, including the communication up until that point and their perception of the other participants' reactions to it (Lent, 2004). Through this feedback mechanism, outward communication can be more effective than formal channels, as participants in the conversations elaborate or modify what they have to say in order to deal with someone else's objections or misunderstandings (Jackson and Duffy, 19180). The distinction between outward and inward communication parallels Krauss and Morsella (19180) distinction between impoverished and rich communication channels.

Language choice during dissemination of information was found to be significant during the study with respondents referring the use of respondents' language and sometimes coded language to communicate with other respondents. There are both structural and functional characteristics of communication occasions that cause the language of communication to be more or less formal hence preferred mode of communication. Among structural characteristics, the nature of the relationship among the participants and their social roles influences its formality. For example, conversations among strangers or among those with highly unequal status will be more formal in language than conversations among close friends or among peers. Similarly, conversation among people acting in their official roles will be more formal in language than conversation among the same people out of role. If communicational partners have the ability to communicate with each other in simpler language, they need not stand on ceremony in their communication, and communication is shaped by language style (Brown and Fraser, 1979).

Apart from audio forms of communication, respondents also recommended other non-audio forms of communication were also used as key channels of communication. Newspaper and magazines formed the basis of written form of communication that comprised the print media. Comparatively lower numbers of the residence obtained their conflict resolution information from newspapers and magazines, where more male were reading newspaper than female probably because males would afford them and were more literate than females. This is highly anticipated because most audience obtaining information from newspaper and magazines must be literate, which was better in males than females. It is thus presumed that since the area had less than 5% of the respondents being totally illiterate, it is anticipated that more people would be able to read and comprehend the content of the information within those print media.

Other factors could also come into play, which may include limited access to the print media information due to the cost of such information. In areas where most are poor and the cost of the newspaper being higher, made most residents to purchase other items as viable opportunity costs. It is thus quite determinate and logical that newspaper and magazines are more lavish to vast majority of the rural populace. Thus, most of those who seemed to be able to buy these literature, had regular jobs that guaranteed them decent and better pay packages that enabled them to save some income to purchase newspapers and magazines. Such kinds of people are rarely found in the rural areas where opportunities for decent employment are quite trifling.

True communication is designed to achieve a mutual understanding of the meaning of the message (information, ideas, opinions, feelings) that each person intends to convey, in exactly the way they want the message to be received. These methods are in line with Riley (1965) communication model to reach larger audience. The model indicates that the communicator who is the conflict resolution respondents, send messages of conflict resolution in accordance with the expectations and actions of other persons and groups within the same social structure and the receiver benefits from the messages - in the communications process sends feedback to the communicator who is also a member of a primary group. Both the communicator and receiver of the message are part of an overall social system.

The information gathered through communication among the respondents were found to be useful in helping them to manage financial resources mainly through proper budgeting as well as help them to make better decisions concerning the conflict resolution information in homes. There is reason to think that communication among respondents is particularly useful in supporting the social functions of groups. This is because respondents are less explicit in regulating social relationships than they are in regulating other aspects of work procedures. For example, personnel communication guides frequently describe the bureaucratic procedures for annual performance appraisals when information is disseminated, but they neither attempt to regulate the *ad hoc* personal judgments that communication make of the people reporting to them. A vast literature in communication psychology suggests that relatively unstructured and informal communication is at the basis of social processes, such as person perception and liking, which underlie group maintenance and member support (e.g. Fuerstein, 11806; Gibson and Hanna, 1992).

However, in this study it was hard to establish from the respondents whether the nature of communication used by the respondents had enhanced access to conflict resolution information This implies that the nature of communication that were used to disseminate the conflict resolution information have not actually benefited the intended beneficiaries. The other possible reasons could be that the nature of communications being used to pass the conflict resolution information is not suitable. The researcher also established up to 23.4% of the respondents stated that they do find the nature of communication among professional appropriate. The roles of the conflict resolution information were quite important to the local residents. Even though the roles of

these information were not far reaching because of the low percentage of people accessing them, and the low frequency of obtaining them, nevertheless they were of paramount importance to the local residents. If majority of the locals can be able to acquire these conflict resolution information then most of the residents was able to better their lives in conflict resolution issues.

Most of the respondents acknowledged the fact that conflict resolution information help in financial resource management such as proper budgeting and optimum purchasing without actually buying one type of food item than other less important food resources. The other financial resource management could be attributed to less expenditure on conflict resolution deficiency diseases discussed earlier that may be alleviated by proper diet selection.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Bearing the findings of this study in mind and the reality of intra-ethnic violence among the Abakuria and other communities in Kenya, in the past decades and the attendant effects on national development, all institutions in Kenya should perform their functions responsibly to ensure the conflict is resolved. Since the national mass media do much of their reporting of conflicts from a distance, the study recommends setting up of a vernacular broadcast media station exclusively for the Abakuria ethnic community. The set up vernacular radio station must be involved in deliberate peace-making efforts through their reportage for a peaceful society. Therefore, to ensure peace, unity, reconciliation and social equilibrium for national development in a homogenous, convergent and an intra-ethnic prone community like the Abakuria, the following strategies have been suggested as ways of strengthening the capacity of the mass media to manage intra-ethnic, inter-clan or communal conflicts in the area:

- i). Community leadership should endeavour to impart proper teachings and interpretations of their cultural tenets, indigenous intra-community conflict resolution strategies and dogmas to their followers in the mass media in order to avoid perceived injustices that may cause eruption of active or violent conflict
- ii). Involvement and commitment of media players to conflict prevention, resolution and management, so that they can design, develop and transmit appropriate messages to address conflict resolution
- iii). Advocacy for policy support and commitment to a strategic and transformational approach to mass media programming.
- iv). Proper management of conflict resolution can be achieved by proper sharing of the information among respondents. It is recommended that respondents should undergo further training on the best way to share the information and further disseminate it to the local residents for consumption.

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