



Pre-Colonial Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Interactions between the Abagusii and their Neighbouring Communities

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of the study that was carried out to establish the nature and context community interactions in south-western region of Kenya. The major focus was on how the Abagusii interacted with their neighboring communities, mainly the Luo, Kipsigis and Maasai. This study was anchored on the following objectives: to establish the historical evolution of the Abagusii during the pre-colonial period; to find out the major battles that occurred as a result of the interaction between the Abagusii and their neighbouring Communities during the pre-colonial period and to examine the positive and negative outcomes of the interaction between the Abagusii and their neighbouring Communities during the pre-colonial period. Exploratory and qualitative research design was used to establish how these communities interacted. The target population included the elders and knowledgeable people thought to be the custodians of information on the subject of study. Using purposive and snow ball methods, a total of 70 respondents were interviewed using questionnaire schedules. Data was generated through the use face to face interviews, observations and document Analysis. Data collection instruments used in the study were questionnaires and interview schedules. Both primary and secondary methods were used to collect data. Data was analyzed using the descriptive statistics and content analysis. Findings of the study revealed that in the pre-colonial period the Abagusii evolved and developed as an indigenous community and that the initial interaction between the Abagusii and their neighbouring communities in the pre-colonial period was characterized by numerous battles. The later, this kind of interaction was by both peaceful co-existence and conflicts. Positive interactions in form of intermarriages, trade and cultural borrowing among others. Negative interactions included wars and raids. It was further established that inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic interactions had historical ramifications on the inhabitants' perception of nationhood. From this study, it can be argued that inter- and intra-ethnic relations in the region. Findings from this study may be used by researchers who may want to understand how various other communities interacted in the pre-colonial times. Further, planners in Kenyan government may utilize findings from this study to plan for national integration and peace-building initiatives. The study recommends that Scholars should also consider studying interactions of other ethnic communities which were not covered by the researcher to enhance national integration. Further, there should be attempts by the government to interrogate and provide lasting solution to the occasional negative interactions such as perpetual border conflicts that exist between the Abagusii and their neighbouring communities in order to guarantee peaceful co-existence.

Key words: Pre-colonial, Abagusii, Interaction and communities

INTRODUCTION

African continent in the modern times seem to encounter the complexity of identity. The nature of ethnocentrism that we encounter today has its roots from the pre-colonial times. Scholars of African history believe that colonialism, in its effort to restructure pre-colonial societies, further enhanced this situation. Interaction among communities has been a natural phenomenon in all world communities. It is through interaction that communities get to learn and borrow cultural activities for good or for worse. In pre-colonial Africa, communities used to interact in several ways, which sometimes promoted peace among them. Some communities are known to have interacted through warfare, others through marriage, meaning that this interaction was both positive and negative.



According to Kakai, inter-ethnic interactions that date from pre-colonial days, some of which are characterized by peaceful co-existence, suspicions, tensions and even conflicts continue to pass over over to the present generations, are products of historical forces of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The use of iron tools which is associated with the Bantu marked a significant moment of African interaction. Iron tools enhanced weaponry, allowed groups to clear and manage dense forests, plough fields for farming, all of which had far reaching effects on people's lives. Ultimately, iron tools allowed Africans to flourish in every environment, and thus they could live in larger communities, which led to the formation of states and kingdoms. With state formation, came the formation of modern civilizations with common languages, belief and value systems, art, religion, lifestyle and culture. Interaction between states was by trade, conquering and invading or pushing the weaker communities.

In Southern Africa, the peoples of modern day Zimbabwe and Zambia are said to have had elaborate interactions with their neighbours. As a result of exploitation of the mineral wealth of their land, they were able to carry out booming businesses. consequently, they established a large network through the area. Pre-colonial contacts were often more mobile. However, societies that moved to the land where there was fertility and closer to water supply had sedentary way of life. This was particularly true with the Eastern and Southern regions of the continent as well as in the Sahel and desert regions of West Africa. Therefore, as they moved to various places in search for pasture and water, they sometime had to push or force other communities that occupied the place to vacate.

Historical studies have consistently shown have shown that Pre-colonial African societies were never completely isolated. Interaction between neighbours, across regions, and even outside African continent was a common feature. Societies interacted with one another through commerce, marriage, migration, diplomacy and warfare. Their fertile land, trade routes, or cattle forced interaction with other communities. East Africa was in contact with Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Indian traders. Portugal established Elmina in modern day Ghana its first African trading outpost, in 1482. Commerce was instrumental in state formation. Trade offered the ability to exchange local surpluses for rare foods and goods. Across the Saharan desert and along the Swahili coastline of East Africa, vast trade networks developed. World renowned marketplaces and massive cities emerged at trade crossroads, such as Zanzibar and Timbuktu. For instance, it is estimated that Kumbi, a large city in the Western Sudan, possessed a population of 15 000 to 20 000 by the eleventh century. Kings and leaders, such as those of Ghana, controlled their areas' local markets and received tributes from traders. Camels and donkeys connected distant societies, and allowed trade to occur across the Sahara. Areas with mineral wealth, such as Great Zimbabwe, developed mining capabilities and traded these for manufactured goods from overseas. This study examined inter-and intra-ethnic relations which prevailed in the pre- colonial period, in order to demonstrated ways in which inter-and intra-ethnic co-operations, suspicions, tensions and even conflicts between the Abagusii and the neighbouring communities in the period of reference.

Statement of the Problem

Interaction among communities in Africa has a long history. Scholars from a variety of disciplines including sociology, anthropology; linguistics and psychology have had keen interest in the understanding of how communities interact with each other in order to comprehend their present behaviour. However, there are very few historical studies, which have paid serious attention to ethnic identity, ethno cultural ramifications and ethnic relations in Kenya, both in the past and present. No known historical study, specifically on critical analysis of the interactions between the Abagusii's and their neighbouring communities in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Therefore, there was a serious need to venture into this study, in an effort to investigate the issue ethno-centrism and interactions as well as militarism in the area of study. The study illuminates the perception of issues of inter-ethnic co-operation, ethnic inter-dependence as well as inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts between the Abagusii and their neighbouring communities.

Objectives of the Study

This study was anchored on the following objectives; to establish the historical evolution of the Abagusii during the



pre-colonial period, to find out the major battles that occurred as a result of the interaction between the Abagusii and their neighbouring Communities during the pre-colonial period and to examine the positive and negative outcomes of the interaction between the Abagusii and their neighbouring Communities during the pre-colonial period.

Research Premises

The study aimed at testing the premises that;. Abagusii evolved and developed as a distinct indigenous community in the pre-colonial period, the initial interaction between the Abagusii and their neighbouring communities in the period was characterized by numerous battles, that the later interactions were marked by both peaceful co-existence and conflicts.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted in Gusiiland, a territory which is now occupied by two counties, that is Nyamira and Kisii. It focused on the history of the Abagusii's interaction with the neighbouring community, during the pre-colonial period and its outcome. The study had a number of limitations. First it was not possible to establish all the interactions among all Kenyan communities whom the Abagusii interacted with. The study focused on communities who had direct contact with the community. These communities were; the Luo, the Kipsigis and the Maasai. Pre-colonial period is used in this study to refer to early beginning of the Gusi history to the period when the Europeans occupied Kenya. Most of the elderly people that existed during the Pre-colonial period were not available to provide first-hand information. As well, historical records on pre-colonial interactions were scanty. However, every effort was made to use questionnaires for the available elders, historians and knowledgeable individuals who provided information about the subject matter. These people may have not had exhaustive knowledge about pre-colonial interactions.

Bad weather especially rainy seasons in Gusiiland affected the movement of the researcher from one destination to another to conduct study interviews. Bad infrastructure especially loose murram roads in Gusiiland's rural areas, were occasionally impassable due to their poor conditions. This delayed field work study. Some respondents were not ready to give information to the researcher due to the fear of disclosing secrets about their communities. This posed a challenge in the initial data collection but was later fixed.

Assumptions of the Study

The study was based on the following assumptions; that the respondents would cooperate and give correct and valid information, the samples taken were reasonably enough to represent the entire population for accuracy of the study and that methods used in data collection would give accurate results.

Justification and Significance of the Study

The study will be used for reference by academicians, scholars and historians who will wish to have knowledge on the history of interactions between various indigenous communities living in Kenya, more so the Abagusii and the neighboring communities.

The study will be used as a means of building up Archival sources for studying cultural interactions in African history. This information will be handy to future researchers working on ethnographical studies.

Theoretical Perspective

This Study utilized a variety of theoretical perspectives that deal with interactions. Some of these included Cultural-Historical activity Theory. This is used for studying a group that exists largely in virtual form. This theory is used in qualitative research methodologies. It provides a method of understanding and analyzing a phenomenon, finding out patterns and making inferences across interactions.



The theory of Multiculturalism which took shape in the latter half of the twentieth, examines the cultural diversity of communities within a given society and the policies that promote this diversity. As a descriptive term, Multiculturalism is the simple fact of cultural diversity. This theory encourages ideologies and policies that promote diversity. Two main different and seemingly inconsistent strategies have developed. The first focuses on interaction and communication between different cultures. Interactions of cultures provide opportunities for the cultural differences to communicate and interact and create multiculturalism. This approach is known as Interculturalism. The second one centers on diversity and cultural uniqueness. Cultural isolation can protect the uniqueness of the local culture of a nation or area and also contribute to global cultural diversity. Assimilation theories also explain how group relation might develop, assimilation is a process in which formerly distinct and separate groups come to share a common culture and merge together socially. As society undergoes assimilation, differences among groups decrease. The above theories were handy in the study of the interaction between the Abagusii and their neighbouring communities.

Conflict theory was also utilized in this study. Scholars such as Kakai have argued that Conflicts helps persons in a given society to adjust and know more about their state. This is because people should understand their relationship. Conflict is known in to have influence on people's way of life. When conflicts emerge, they affect both positive and negative co-existence in any given community. Kakai informs us that the origins of conflict perspective was postulated by early western philosophers of Christian era who included; Niccolo Machiaveli, Thomas Hobes, Polybius and Heraclitus. These theories will be meaningful in studying the Abagusii's encounter with neighbouring communities in historical periods.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars from diverse backgrounds have discussed African community interactions from different stand points. Sheriff asserts that for many millennia, the many communities in Kenya adjusted themselves to their ecological niches. As a consequence communities such as the Agikuyu and the Mijikenda developed agricultural economies. Others, including the Maasai and the Samburu practiced pastoralist forms of production. The majority such as the Luo and the Abagusii adapted themselves to a mixture of crop cultivation and livestock keeping. Besides there the Ogiek who thrived on hunting and gathering. Production was primarily for collective subsistence rather than individual accumulation. The kinship system was the basis of ownership of factors of production which included land, livestock and labour. Labour was largely cooperative within the family and the larger kin group. It was also manual. Surplus was quantitatively small and imposed limitations on trade. Regional and long-distance trade involved prestige goods and influenced society only minimally. The rewards of labour were mostly redistributed in kind and according to need. There existed little differences in wealth possession. Classes, if they existed, were largely incipient.

According to Smith, reciprocity and the egalitarian ideal ensured that individuals never slid into abject poverty. There was very little impetus for large-scale state formation. Instead the largest political unit was the collectivity of a few families related by blood. Communities were highly a cephalous or segmented. Centralized kingdoms were mainly found in the inter-lacustrine region to the west of Lake Victoria. The ethnic boundaries among pre-colonial Kenyan

Communities were fluid. Inter-ethnic interactions were characterized by trade, intermarriages and limited and intermittent warfare. The histories of migrations and settlement were about continuous waning and waxing of the various ethnicities. Society was anything but static. Colonialism only gave new shape, meaning and direction to the communities' inherent dynamism.

As far as inter-ethnic relations is concerned, a number of studies tackle causes of the conflicts in various regions of the world. The best example in Yugoslavia. Studies indicate that as early as 1948 president Josif Tito feared conflicts that would unfold as a result of Montenegrin and Croatian populace resisting unification. Indeed, in the early 1970s there was tension that connoted a conflict over the future of Yugoslavia. In 1977, the Serbian leadership grumbled against the constitution. In 1980, it seized on the death of Tito as a signal to begin the unravelling of the federalist era. Banac contends that by 1991 when communism declined in Eastern Europe and the victory of the opposition in the 1990 elections in Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Bosnia-

Research Locale

Nyamira County: Gini Coefficient by Ward

Legend

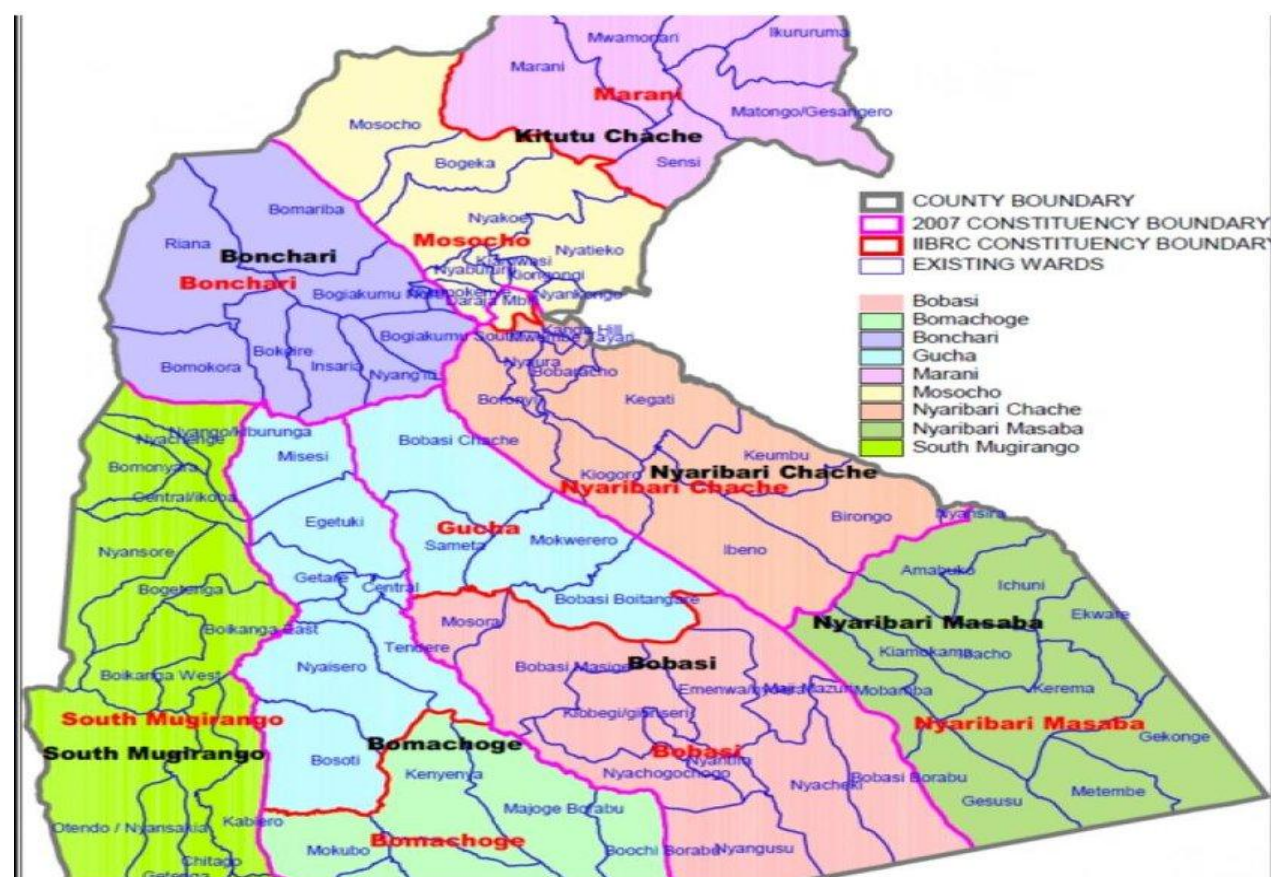
County Boundary

Gini Coefficient

- 0.60 - 0.72
- 0.48 - 0.59
- 0.36 - 0.47
- 0.24 - 0.35
- 0.11 - 0.23

0 5 10 20 Kilometers

Location of Nyamira County in Kenya



Kisii County Map



STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive survey design which allowed the collection of information about people's attitudes, opinions, habits and social issues any of the variety of education or social issues as Orotho states. The study took a descriptive qualitative approach by looking at the history of pre-colonial interaction s between the Abagusii and neighbouring communities.

The target population included; the elderly community leaders, historians with knowledge about the Gusii Oral history and other community members thought to be the custodians of the knowledge about early contacts between the Abagusii and neighbouring communities in the past. Using snowball and purposive method of data collection, a total of 70 respondents were interviewed during data collection. This figure was arrived at, at the point of saturation.

This study made use of questionnaires and face to face interviews to collect data. Document review for secondary data was also be used to gather data. The validity of the instrument was tested using pilot tests. Both Primary and Secondary techniques were used in data collection. Primary data were derived from field interviews achieved through face to face interviews and focus group discussions. Questionnaires were administered and face to face interviews were conducted on the respondents. The respondents were assured that strict confidentiality would be maintained in dealing with the responses .The filled questionnaires were collected after one week. As far as Secondary data is concerned, Materials, such as publications, journals, historical texts and articles.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The purpose of descriptive statistics is to enable the researcher to meaningfully describe a distribution of scores or measurement using statistics. The process of data analysis required the use of a computer spreadsheet and for this reason the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Version 22 Of SPSS proved hand for this purpose. Data obtained was thoroughly checked and edited for validity. Data was analyzed using qualitative methods. Data was presented and analyzed using simple statistical techniques like frequency tables, pie charts and graphs. The data was then arranged in various themes in line with the objectives of the study.

As far as ethical considerations is concerned, relevant introductory letter were obtained from various authorities such as the county governments of Kisii and Nyamira . The participants were engaged in the study on a voluntary basis . The researcher explained to the participants the objective of the study and the significance of the study. In this participants were be guaranteed of privacy and confidentiality.

RESULTS

The findings of this study is arranged into the various themes as discussed below.

Origins, Migration and Early Cultural History of the Abagusii

The origin, migration and early cultural history of the Abagusii discussed in here is based mainly on oral sources supplemented with written works. The Abagusii are Western Bantu ethnic group who inhabit the south western part of Kenya. Presently ,they occupy over twenty sub-counties in Kisii and Nyamira counties in the former Nyanza Province which is the currently known as Nyanza of Kenya. From interviews conducted in the field, it was evident that the Abagusii have settled here since they migrated from their mythical cradle land in the 'North' which they also refer to as 'Misiri'.

According to Abagusii tradition, Mogusii was the founding father of their society. This was the person after whom their community is named. Similar sources imply that Mogusii was the son of Osogo. Osogo is believed to have been the son of Moluguhia, son of Kigoma, son of Riabaka, who was the son of Kintu. The Abagusii tradition further asserts that Kintu first inhabited the 'big river valley in Misiri' (presumably the River Nile Valley in Egypt). It was this man who led the migration of the community from 'Misiri' to Mount Elgon where they



first settled before moving to their present homeland. In this region, the Abagusii appear to have lived for three to four generations before dispersing finally to the various destinations. Gusii traditions also indicate that Moluguhia, Mogusii's grandfather, had sons who became the founders of the various Baluyia clans who now inhabit south western Kenya. The elder sons of Moluguhia were Osogo and Mogikoyo. The Abagusii, Abakuria, Abalagoi, Abasuba and other related communities became the descendants of Osogo. The Agikuyu, Aembu, Ameru, the Akamba and other related communities are believed to belong to Mogikoyo's ancestry line.

From Mount Elgon, the Abagusii sources indicate that their ancestors and those of the Abakuria, Abalagoli and Abasuba moved southwards along the course of river Nzoia. By the eighteenth century they had settled on the eastern shores of Lake Victoria. They finally moved eastwards and settled at Goye in Yimbo. Their settlement extended to Urima, Olowo Sare, and Ramogi. The Luo invaded the area and hostility developed between the two communities. The Abagusii later moved southwards. They further moved to the shores of Lake Gangu in Alego and hence to Sakwa, Asembo, Seme and Kisumu. They are believed to have stayed at Kisumu from about 1640 to 1755. The Abagusii tradition further indicates that Nyakemogendi, the mother of Mogusii and Mogusii died at Kisumu. Due to severe famine, drought and plague, the ancestors of the Abagusii left Kisumu for Kano plains in search of food and a better home.

The Abagusii migration to, and settlement at Kano, is thought to have lasted for four decades, presumably between 1760 and 1800 A.D. They settled by the lake shore from Dunga to Nduru, and spread into the interior along streams. Their furthest settlement inland was at present day Kibigori. They had a thin population and they led a scattered life. A family unit consisted a man, his wife and their children. They had mud earthen huts and very little contact with each other. According to W.R. Ochieng, the Abagusii pattern of settlement was largely influenced by Lake Victoria, and the rivers and streams that flowed into the Gulf of Nyanza while the majority of people crowded along the shores of the Gulf. A substantial number occupied river valleys. For instance they lived in scattered homesteads along rivers Miru and Ombeyi. The Abagusii settled down in this area to graze their large herds of cattle, to hunt the large herds of wild animals, and to eat fish that were plenty in this area.

The Abagusii's stay at Kano witnessed a remarked evolution of the community. The period was characterised by expansion and transformation of individual family units into small but distinct clans. There was also the evolution of small groups, which had migrated from Kisumu under recognised leaders, into a number of "corporate" clans which later developed into sub-tribes headed by various clan elders.

During their stay in Kano plains, the Abagusii had a mixed economy. They reared cattle mainly for meat and milk. They grew such crops as finger millet, sorghum, millet and roots. They hunted a large number of animals. Hunting, mainly done by the young energetic men and boys, was mainly for Chingera (Buffaloes), Chingabi (Gazelles), Ebisusu (Rabbits), Chiguto (Anti-bears), Ebirongo (Porcupines), and Chinchogu (Elephants). Most wild animals were hunted for food, some for their skin which was highly valued for making shields, costumes for song and dance and for sale to the neighbouring Luo community. Lions' and Leopards' skins were used for ceremonial purposes. The Abagusii entered into various hunting groups. They celebrated over the spoils of the hunt and distributed them to the beneficiaries immediately after the hunt.

Various birds were trapped or killed using sling shots. This was mainly the work of young boys. Birds like Amachore (Weaverbirds), Amaruma (Doves), Chingware (Ducks), and others fell victims of traps. All these supplemented the Abagusii diet. Interviews carried out in the field indicated that the Abagusii women also gathered wild vegetables which included Chinsaga (spider flower), Rinagu (black night shade) and Ototo (East African Spinach). However, the kind of food that was hunted and gathered was never enough to satisfy people, it only comprised a small portion of the Abagusii diet.

The Abagusii Community adopted traditions connected with the founders of their community. A totem played an important role in the evolution of the Abagusii. A totem here has been defined as 'a class of material objects which primitive societies regarded with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between individual members of their society an intimate obligatory, and all together special relationship'.



A totem may be a feared, emulated or dangerous hunted animal, and edible plant or any staple food. For our purpose, the clan totem, thus, is an object revered by a group of people who believe themselves to be of one blood, descended from one common ancestor, bound together by a common responsibility for each other, and are united by a common faith. Sometimes the members of a totem group may refer to themselves by the name of their totem, commonly believing themselves to be descended from the totem, and therefore related to it. In such circumstances a man naturally treats the totem with reverent respect, the totem becoming an animal or a plant he will not kill or eat. It is however believed that totem animals could be kept as pets and would be treated with an almost religious respect, being things connected with founder ancestors. In this respect, leading Abagusii families are especially believed to have tamed and kept their totem animals in their homes, a symbol treated with a lot of respect. Disrespect to a totem would lead to a military defeat against the clan of a disrespectful man.

The connection between a man and his totem is generally regarded as mutually beneficial. The totem protects the man in a number of ways, for example by revealing to him in dreams the fortunes or misfortunes that are imminent. The man, in turn shows respect to the totem in a number of ways, usually by not killing it. Working against this was followed by a penalty.

Functionally totems have a unifying role, especially as members of a totem clan would regard each other as kinsmen, and are therefore bound to help and protect each other. A totem is thus ancestral to the clan and also to the individual, especially since it is connected with the “instituted morality, the totem is almost hedged about with taboos of avoidance or strictly ritualised contact.” In its religious projection a totem constitutes mutual respect and protection between a man and his totem and has consequently been defined as “the mystique of the family projected and extended into larger social forms.”

As a result of increase in population, conflict with their neighbours, the Maasai and the Luo, the Abagusii had to leave Kano plains to the highlands where they are presently. This was just a continuation of their migration. The most probable reasons for their migration were overpopulation, infertility of Kano plains which was caused by over cultivation, lack of security and famine. Justifying why the Abagusii had to migrate from Kano plain, A.A. Onchoke asserts:

There was neither food, fruits nor crops.

it was a terrible famine.

The story goes that whoever had his

brother got hold of his hand and started

after their relatives who had gone before.

According to Abel.Nyakundi Onchoke ,Abagusii’s migration from Kano plains by a few clans was mainly caused by external attack from the Luo and tropical diseases such as Malaria. The Abagusii left Kano plains and moved to Gelegele near Sotik From here a small group infiltrated the highlands, but the majority moved to Kilgoris. This kind of division could have been probably caused by internal conflicts between the migrating clans. The clans that had moved to Kilgoris which is in the present day Trans-mara district settled at Ngararo in 1820. From here, after unstable and strained relationship with the Isiria Maasai characterised by cattle raids on both sides, the Abagusii were scattered during the battle of River Migori. They moved into the highlands, while some took refuge under the Kuria, and others among the Luo of Kabwoch near Nyagoe forest. Throughout the rest of the century, when the majority of the Abagusii were already in the highlands, they gradually spread out within the whole territory and were joined by the group that had taken refuge among the Luo in Kabwoch. Between about 1820 and 1850, these groups again re crossed the Gulf separately to most of the present locations where they are found.

At the beginning of nineteenth century, the Abagusii were either settled or nearly settled in most of their present homeland. The Abagusii had been migrating as clans and over three centuries of migration, clan



identity assumed a prominent form. Such clans as Kitutu, Nyaribari, Mogirango, Bassi, Majoge and Wanjale were prominent in Gusiiland.

In the years just preceding colonial rule, Abagusii did not have any centralised political organisation. To a large extent, they derived their values mainly from religious experiences and beliefs. This view is supported by the scholars who have studied the Abagusii society such as P.Mayer, R.A. Levine and W.R. Ochieng. The community was made up of a collection of many political units, based on exogamous patrilineal clans or clan groupings, each of which often consisted of a large clan with a number of small clans or sub-clans or families, usually occupying a distinct territory over a ridge or succession of adjacent ridges.

T. Bosibori observes that no one time did the entire Abagusii community fall under one 'tribal' leadership. This means that there was no ethnic authority which: overruled clan authority either in dealings with neighbouring ethnic groups or in the management of internal affairs. The clan then was the most effective political unit.

The Abagusii clans were aware of having originally a common ancestor, and they were connected by bonds of intermarriage and common beliefs and practices in such a way that they considered themselves as a unit in contrast to the surrounding groups with whom they did not maintain such bonds. The leader of each political unit was locally called Omoruoti or Omogambi, a title equivalent to a chief. This was a man who was accepted publicly and performed religious and political roles. Omogambi was assisted by council of elders, etureti. The etureti met when there was need to solve social, political and religious problems.

Omogambi were regarded as living representatives of the original lineage founders and were believed to be men who were divinely sanctioned to lead clans in communal sacrifices. and social activities. They would be the first to cultivate, the first to sow, to taste crops on maturity and the first to harvest.

Besides the Amogambi, there were other notable leaders locally called Abarai. W.R. Ochieng has defined these leaders as persons who were talented or had qualities of leadership, played a directing role, wielded commanding influence, or had a following in any sphere of activity or thought. They consisted of 'prophets' (for example Sakawa) elders, seers and rainmakers. The Gusii homestead was an internally self-governing unit. Omogaka (the father of the home) was the head of the family. He was assisted by his wife (Omokungu) to look after the children. A family consisted of husband, wife or wives in case of a polygamous family and children. Omosacha (the 'husband') of the family had the role of looking for food and other family needs. While Omokungu had a duty of doing domestic work such as cooking and looking after the children. Conflicts, between members of a given home were handled by parents. Those of different homesteads were taken to the elders' council headed by the Omogambi

Religion was another unifying factor among the Abagusii. They believed in one God called Engoro who was believed to be the Supreme Being. Engoro was the creator of the world. According to C. Nyabonyi Engoro among the Abagusii governed man's destiny, he brought rain to him and gave him all that he desired. W:R. Ochieng' holds the view that Engoro sent to man rain or storm, well being or famine, health or disease, peace or war depending on what he chose to give him

The Abagusii believed that God's continued operation in the physical world was executed through his agents, the ancestral spirits (ebirecha). These spirits were believed to have great influence on the social and economic lives of the Abagusii. In the event of a calamity or disease, a seer or a diviner (Omoragori) could be consulted on the wishes of the ancestors, who more often than not were believed to be behind the calamity. Sometimes, the Sun stood for Engoro and the two terms were used interchangeably.

In the words of G.A.S North-cote, 'God among the ancient Kisii people seemed to have slid on the scales of meaning between sun and ancestor worship' Individuals had direct access to God throughout the year by means of prayer. The Abagusii offered sacrifices to God which were conducted mainly by the heads of the various homesteads. At harvesting time or the start of a given year there were always thanks giving to God in form of sacrifices which was followed by festivals involving singing, dancing and beer drinking.



Among the Abagusii, the family was a social arena where all important human events such as birth, initiation, marriage and death took place in the pre-colonial period. These were marked with celebrations, feasting, singing and dancing. The entire Abagusii indigenous education acquired through infancy to marriage stage was put into practice throughout life. It was tested, refined and perfected.

EARLYCONTACTS AND BATTLES BETWEEN THE ABAGUSII AND NEIGHBOURING COMMUNITIES, 1850 AND 1895

Archival sources as well as oral tradition do indicate that in the Kano plains where the Gusii settled after their long time of migration, they came across a number of other Bantu speakers who inhabited the area at the foot of Ramogi hills, an area believed to be the original homeland of the Nilotic speaking linguistic group. These communities were already practising economic activities ranging from fishing along the lakeshores, cultivation of crops such as bananas ,millet and cassava. They also raised livestock which provided them with milk, meat and by products for domestic use.It is belives that the Abagusii and the people they found merged through assimilation.

As the Abagusii settled in in Kano plains, they had a devastating encounter from the warlike luo, led Ramogi Ajwang',a seasoned warior of that time. This encounter led to some bantu communities to move to safer places. Some of the bantu communities living in the region were assimilated by the Luo who were a cattle rearing community. As the Luo moved along the lakeshore, another important expansion involving the Maasai was taking place along along the rift valley, mainly to the East of the Hill. The Maasai fought and displaced the Nandi,a Kalenjin speaking ethnic community and robbed them of their animals. The Nandi are said to have invaded Gusii homesteads and got away with large herds of animals to replace theirs which had been taken by the Maasai. This scenario caused a lot of agony and anguish to the already devastated Gusii.

So around 1770, Gusii elders called a big community meeting to find out what the people felt about a move southwards. They sent scouts to see where they could settle in peace. The best place seemed to be country near Kabianga in Kericho district.

The years of warfare

The Gusii found Kabianga wet and cold throughout the year. They tried to plant millet and pumpkins in their new gardens, but these crops did not do well there (the area was originally densely covered with rain forest, which has nowadays largely been cleared for tea plantations). And as many of their cattle died at the same time as their crops failed, famine broke out. So many of the Gusii died.

Living alongside the Gusii was Isiria Maasai. The arrival of the Kipsigis, the cousins of the Nandi and who is now also part of the Kalenjin, plunged the whole region into military turmoil. One day in a fierce battle the Gusii killed the Maasai war-leader, Ole Kericho (after whom, by one version, Kericho town is named). After that the Gusii and Maasai lived side by side for many years. The Gusii were stronger and better warriors than the Maasai, who used to attack at night for this reason. The Gusii built thick thorn fences and dug deep trenches around their homesteads.

But the real threat lay not with the Maasai but with the Kipsigis, who were similarly attached to cattle and believed, like the Maasai, that all the cattle in the world belonged to them. As such, they began to raid both the Maasai and the Gusii for cattle; and even the Luo, whom the Kipsigis feared, had to bear Kipsigis night raids on their homesteads. The Kipsigis eventually drove the Maasai away from the area that is now called Buret. The same was done to the Abagusii, whom they called 'Kosopek'.

The first encounters between the Abagusii and the Kipsigis was by the Kipsamaek clan of the Kipsigis, which and took place near a place called Kabianga. The Gusii defended themselves with *chinsara*, arrows, and *amatimo*, spears which they fired from a safe distance. But the Kipsigis had very heavy shields made of buffalo hide, which they used to protect themselves against Gusii arrows and spears. Their strategy was to wait until the Gusii had thrown all their arrows and spears and then attack, so the Gusii had to retreat into their homesteads. To protect themselves the Gusii built heavy stone fortifications, called *orwaki*, round their



villages. These were guarded from the outside by deep trenches. They had tall, stout walls of stone and mud, on top of which were strewn heavy acacia thorns. The forts were repeatedly stormed by the Kipsigis, but it took several years of raids, ambushes and counter-ambushes before the Gusii were finally forced to migrate southwards beyond the area of present-day Sotik. And even here the Kipsigis did not leave them in peace.

These attacks divided the Gusii once again: one group stayed in the region of Kericho, where they eventually became one with the Kipsigis. But the majority headed south to the present-day Gusii Highlands. They argued that it was easier for them to defend their homes on the high ridges of the highlands than on the rolling tableland of Kericho and Sotik. There, initial years great hardship in clearing the land to make it suitable for agriculture were followed by better times, which saw the development of a strong economy based on cultivation, which survives to this day.

Another group refused to go to the highlands because of the cold conditions that prevailed. They migrated southwestwards and established themselves along the banks of the Migori River (sometimes spelled Mogori), at a place called Chimanga Chia Miehina, in the Trans Mara triangle. Today this is in Tanzania. Living across the river, in the plains to the south, was the Kwavi Maasai. The Gusii began to fight once again with the Maasai over cattle thefts.

The Battle of Migori River, circa 1820

The following is from William R. Ochieng's "Kenya's People: People of the South-Western Highlands - Gusii". One day Ngararo, a renowned Gusii warrior, killed the leader of the Maasai, Ole Sekur Sadimo. Sadimo's brother, Omoburogo, decided that he would revenge the murder of his brother. Disguised as a Gusii warrior, he made his way into the homesteads of Ngararo, whom he found eating with his children. Omoburogo stabbed Ngararo in the back and also in the stomach several times. His death-cry is said to have drawn the attention of the entire Gusii settlement, who, on finding Omoburogo still within the fort, 'mercilessly slashed him to pieces'.

The Gusii were very angry; they attacked and burnt the nearby Maasai homesteads, and murdered any Maasai man they found inside. The Maasai quickly assembled every available moran (warrior), and together swooped on the Abagusii in a solid mass, knocked down the Gusii fortifications, set fire to the huts, rounded up the cattle, and killed everybody who stood in their way, men, women and children. The remaining Gusii, in a panic-stricken frenzy, scattered in headlong flight.

This tragic battle, which once and for all destroyed the corporate identity of the Gusii, is called the Battle of Migori River. It took place in about 1820. The site of Ngararo's stabbing is still a place of animal sacrifice, known as 'the place of Ole Ngararo'.

The Battle of Sao Sao

Scholars have concurred that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the Kipsigis had established themselves as a "force to reckon with". They were steadily encroaching into the Gusii Highlands and raiding cattle from their Luo neighbours. They are said to have burnt houses, killed people, even cut to pieces all old livestock which they could not drive away quickly in their raiding expedition. The Gusii, who were still reeling from the shock of Battle of Migori, were in no in any better state to offer effective military resistance. It was becoming clear that if the Abagusii were to survive, then something had to be done about the Kipsigis.

The elders agreed that a meeting should be called in which leading elders and warriors from all Gusii sections should be invited. The meeting was chaired by the legendary prophet Sakawa (also called Mugo wa Kibiru), who was later to foretell the coming of the "White Man" (see below). At the meeting, which was held at Manga, the various Gusii representatives agreed to join forces in fighting the Kipsigis.

Between 1889 and 1892, a rinderpest epidemic swept through East Africa decimating herds of cattle. Finding themselves with very few remaining livestock, the Kipsigis decided to organize a huge raiding expedition to Gusii and Luo country. S.C. Langat describes the assembled force: "Experience of the past encounters, whence



the Kipsigis had emerged victorious - gave the Kipsigis a sense of careless ease in their attitude to battle with the Gusii. In expectation of sure victory the Kipsigis prepared a great raid on the Gusii. Young boys were enlisted to drive the cattle home, and women were also enlisted to carry away the captured stores of food. The raiding party was headed by Malabun ara Makiche from Sotik. At Buret, Chesengeny arap Kaborok and his warriors joined the band. At Belgut more warriors joined. Most of the young men were of the Kapkoimet age-set, while the older ones were Sawe"

The Kipsigis march, which started in the afternoon, reached Gusii country at dusk. As they marched they were followed by a large number of vultures - a sure sign of bad luck. Chesengeny tried to convince Malabun to abandon the raid but Malabun would have none of it. In Gusii-land the first phase of the raid (in Mugirango and Kitutu) was successful, and they destroyed many Gusii villages, but then things began to go wrong. Two leaders of the Kipsigis raiders disagreed, and as a result one party returned home, while the other, led by Malabun Arap Makiche, went on to raid the Luo. Back in the hills studies do indicate that the Abagusii were blowing their horns and drumming to summon all their warriors. Knowing very well that the Kipsigis had crossed to Luo-land the Gusii laid a trap for them. By the early hours of the morning the Gusii warriors were lining the eastern edge of Manga Escarpment in ambush.

At dawn a large scream "*kelele*" was heard. These were the Luo chasing the Kipsigis raiders. As the Kipsigis started to ascend the escarpment along the valley of the Charachani River, they encountered the Gusii at Getwanyi in Kitutu location. The Luo arrived at the battleground when the fight had already started. With both the Luo and Gusii at battle, and with the well laid Gusii ambush, the Kipsigis force was practically wiped out. Very few managed to escape. It is said that some of the survivors hid among the corpses of their fellow tribesmen, others jumped into the rivers and hid in the swamps until nightfall. During the nightfall they escaped back to Kipsigis land.

So great was the loss of life that the Kipsigis elders ordered the 'premature' initiation of young boys into warriorhood, and encouraged young men to marry early so as to increase the population of the tribe. The Gusii, who had never before achieved such a victory, were extremely happy, and as each Gusii group left the battlefield they garlanded themselves with flowers and sang this song as they made their way home:

They used to follow us ee sanyera,
But we said do not follow us ee sanyera,

They used to disturb us ee sanyera,
But we said do not disturb us ee sanyera,
They always disturbed our ancestors sanyera,
They have always followed our fathers sanyera,
Oo oo sanyera banto, sanyera.

The Nilotic invasions

During the century that the Gusii were living in the Kano Plains, the Luo invasion of the north-eastern shores of Lake Victoria began, culminating in the total expulsion of the Gusii from the lakeshore by the eighteenth century (the year 1755 is given in some versions, and 1770 in others).

The Luo were led by a famous warrior called Ramogi Ajwang', and were well versed in warfare, having fought their way south over several centuries through the western part of the Rift Valley. Being a cattle-herding people, the Luo were also more mobile than the predominantly agricultural Bantu living on the lakeshore. Some of the Bantu tribes were assimilated by the new-comers, but most chose to flee: some to the north and south, but mostly eastwards into the fertile hills flanking the lake. Unfortunately, at the same time that the Luo were advancing around the lakeshore, the Maasai were advancing southwards along the Rift Valley to the east of these hills. Although the Maasai seem not to have come into contact with the Gusii at that time, the Nandi - who had been displaced by the Maasai - did. Having lost most of their herds to the Maasai, the Nandi (now part of the Kalenjin group) raided Gusii homesteads in search of fresh cattle.



Around 1770, the Gusii elders called a big community meeting to find out what the people felt about a move southwards. They sent scouts to see where they could settle in peace. The best place seemed to be country near Kabianga in Kericho district.

The Years of Warfare

The Abagusii initially found Kabianga a wet and cold region throughout the year. To them, the area was potential for agricultural production since they were an agrarian society. They tried to cultivate millet and pumpkins in their new gardens, but these crops did not do well there. Their herds of cattle died at the same time as their crops failed. Famine of a large magnitude broke out. This unfortunate tragedy led to many of the Gusii people lost their lives and livestock. Following numerous deaths of animals and failure of crops resulting from drought, the Abagusii called this place Kabianga, a Gusii term meaning (they have refused). This can be interpreted as the refusal of livestock and animals to give good yield.

It should be noted that this name survives unto this day. When the name Kabianga is mentioned anywhere in Gusii land, it reminds the community the terrible encounter they had which claimed people's lives and property such as cattle and farm produce thus bringing about famine and malnutrition to the community (Nyamwaka 2011).

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This marked the beginning of ebisirate (kraals) in the Gusii community which lasted up to and shortly after the coming of the Europeans into the Gusii land. These institutions were meant to bring people together along with their animals so that they could be able to defend themselves against omobisa (the enemy) (Nyamwaka 2011). In some places within the Gusii community, the ebisirate system lasted up to late 1970s when there were increased and forceful Maasai and Kipsigis cattle raids and inter-tribal wars.

The Kipsigis eventually drove the Maasai away from the area (nowadays called Buret), then tried to do the same to the Gusii, who they called 'Kosopek'. The first encounters initiated were by the Kipsamaek clan of the Kipsigis, and took place near Kabianga. The Gusii defended themselves with arrows, which they fired from a safe distance. However, the Kipsigis had very heavy shields made of buffalo hide, which they used to protect themselves against Gusii arrows and spears. Their strategy was to wait until the Gusii had thrown all their arrows and spears and then attack, so the Gusii had to retreat into their homesteads. To protect themselves the Gusii built heavy stone fortifications, called orwaki, round their villages. These were guarded on the outside by deep trenches. They had tall, stout walls of stone and mud, on top of which were strewn heavy acacia thorns. The forts were repeatedly stormed by the Kipsigis, but it took several years of raids, ambushes and counter-ambushes before the Gusii were finally forced to migrate southwards beyond the area of present-day Sotik. And even here the Kipsigis did not leave them in peace.

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The Battle of Migori River, 1820

One day Ngararo, a renowned Gusii warrior, killed the leader of the Maasai, Ole Sekur Sadimo. Sadimo's brother, Omoburogo, decided that he would revenge the murder of his brother. Disguised as a Gusii warrior, he made his way into the homesteads of Ngararo, whom he found eating with his children. Omoburogo stabbed Ngararo in the back and also in the stomach several times. His death-cry is said to have drawn the attention of the entire Gusii settlement, who, on finding Omoburogo still within the fort, 'mercilessly slashed him to pieces'.

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Positive interactions between the Abagusii and the neighbouring communities

The indigenous communities interacted in various ways during the pre-colonial periods as result of migrations. The Abagusii interacted with other communities through intermarriages, sports. Over the centuries, the different tribes established commercial relationships and alliances to cope with the drought periods. Until the 16th century, several ethnic groups inhabited the Bantu areas from Eastern Uganda to Lake Victoria. The south of the lake and the Nyanza province were populated by the Kisii. From the year 1500, the Luos started to invade the north-eastern flank of the lake. Some resident tribes were integrated by the new settlers, but others were pushed northwards and eastwards, taking the Buluyia land and grouping together in what we now know as the Layman people. The Kisii, pressed by the Luos and by the wars of Maasais' and Kipsigis, migrated northwards to their current lands in Kisii Hills (Atieno 2004

Trade was one of the ways in which the Abagusii interacted with other Kenyan indigenous communities .Trade is the exchange of goods and services between individuals, groups and even countries.

Pre-colonial Gusii exchange took place within the homesteads. Tools, weapons, crafts, livestock and agricultural products were exchanged; goats and cows were often used as a medium of exchange. during the nineteenth century, regular barter trade between the Luo and he Gusii conducted by women took place at periodic border markets. In addition there was a regular and voluminous trade of Gusii grain for Luo livestock that took place at Gusii farms. Luo traders arrived in Gusiiland with donkeys loaded with salt and pots. According to Standard Newspaper 26th March, up to the nineteen century, the Abagusii exchanged goods like sorghum, and maize, beans, sweet potatoes and finger-fillet.The Abagusii also traded with the Luhya during the pre-colonial period in the pre-colonial markets where the Luo, Nandi and Luhya came together into trade baskets, wooden tools, quail, and various foodstuffs for cattle fish and tobacco.

It is evident that the Abagusii of Western Kenya interacted with other communities in the pre-colonial period through intermarriages. There is strong evidence that there were long periods of peace between the Abagusii and this must have led to intermarriages and consequent consanguinity. This is evident in the greatly varied complexion between the Abagusii from different sub-regions of Gusii. Some clans of the Suba (Abasoba in Ekegusii)are said to have been completely absorbed by the Abagusii .



The Bantu community with great similarities with the Abagusii is the Ameru from Mount Kenya. Although the Abakuria share a common great deal with the Abagusii in language and culture as well, and a history of intermarriage has led to the prohibition of marriage alliances for specific clans of the Abagusii with some Kuria clans. The Kipsigis, the highland nilotes bordering the Abagusii on the northern and northeastern frontier affectionately refer to the Abagusii as, “kamama” (an appellation connoting extensive marriage alliances between the two very dissimilar neighbours). Indeed many Kipsigis can easily point to someone in the lineage (especially a matriarch) from Gusii.

There was also cultural exchange between the Abagusii and other communities. First Luo borrowed various words from the Abagusii like the Kisii refer to maize as ‘ebituma’ while the call it ‘oduma’. The Abagusii borrowed the term ‘oboruoti’ which means kingship from the Luo who refer to ‘Ruoth’ which means leadership. Names were also borrowed like names like ‘Ochiengi’ among the Kisii was borrowed from the Luo word ‘Ochiengi’. Also the name ‘Ondieki’ among the Abagusii was borrowed from the Luo name ‘Ondiek’. The Abagusii also borrowed from the Kalenjin the term they use to refer to a cooking stick. The Kisii call it ‘omogango’ while the Kalenjin refer to it as, ‘Gango’. As well, they also learnt the art growing sweet potatoes and sorghum from the Luo. Abagusii borrowed skills of fishing, decorative arts and using calabashes as food vessels and the art of making pots, ropes from the Luos from the Luo while the Luo learnt the art of iron working from the Abagusii. Borrowed the art of making protective marks on the body from the Abakuria.

Negative Interactions between the Abagusii and the Kenyan Indigenous Communities

As much as the Abagusii and their neighbouring communities interacted peacefully, there were cases in which these communities got into conflicts. These communities sometimes engaged in warfare, raids and hostile attacks against each other. In pre-colonial Kenya, the tools that were produced by the Abagusii including spears, swords, pangas, shields contributed to warfare in pre-colonial Kenya. It was established that conflicts were mainly fight for grazing grounds, territory borders raiding for livestock and fighting other scarce resources. Raids were usually planned by warriors of A particular community un-expectedly and at very late hours of the night especially when people were deep asleep. The animals that were raided were cattle goats, sheep. If the community that was raided could wake up to resist during the raid some of them could end up being killed during the raids. These took place especially between two warring communities’ effects of the interactions among the indigenous Kenyan communities.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on interactions between the Abagusii and their neighbouring communities. The study has revealed that such interactions were both negative and positive in nature. This was through wars and conflicts on the negative side and trade, marriages and peaceful ceremonies on the positive side. It is hoped that this study will be of interest to scholars, historians and researchers who may wish to know the history of community interactions during the pre-colonial period.

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