Spiritan Interreligious Dialogue, Kenya: Conflict Management among the Wardei and Pokomo Communities

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The Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Conflict Management among the Wardei and Pokomo Communities in Tana River County, Kenya

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**Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to assess the role of interfaith dialogue in conflict management among the Wardei (Muslim) and Pokomo (Christian) communities living in Kinakomba Ward in Wenje Parish in Tana River County, in the Coastal Region of Kenya. In general, in Kenya about eighty percent of the population is Christian while about twenty percent is Muslim, Hindu, African Traditionalists, and other smaller religions. In the coastal region in Kenya about eighty percent of the population is Muslim and twenty percent is Christian. Over ninety-nine percent of the Wardei are Muslims while the majority of the Pokomos are Christians. Wardei are pastoralists, while Pokomos are farmers. Thus the two communities have different cultures and lifestyles.

**Initial Experiences**

Religious leaders in this area play a very important role in interfaith dialogue because conflict is part and parcel of the daily living of the two communities. Despite the fact that the two religions are Abrahamic, the two communities have differences based on their religious be-
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liefs. The other factors at the bottom of the conflict include the struggle for natural resources which are the basic needs of the two communities. The River Tana, which is the longest river in Kenya, passes through here and its water is one of the sources of the conflict. The other sources of conflict include land and pasture. Historical marginalization is also an important factor because it has left both communities living in poverty.

The area only having the two religions makes religious tensions the order of the day. Originally what would happen is the Christians would preach in market places against non-Christians condemning them to hell for their unbelief. The Muslim preachers in turn would turn up in the market place with the Bible and Quran, and reading from different sections, they would disapprove what the Christians had preached earlier and this was a recipe for chaos because there was no way the two would convince each other. As religious leaders we met and wondered aloud what this discourse was all about. It had gone to a point of confrontation between the two religions, so we asked the security operators to intervene otherwise the situation would have deteriorated to a point of no return.

From this point on several initiatives started coming up on how the two communities could co-exist harmoniously. Religious leaders were key here and I started looking at the bigger picture. One of the main issues was that the two communities lived in abject poverty. We are located in an arid and semi-arid area. The area experiences drought after every three years and there is serious flooding every year. These two disasters combine to make a bad situation worse because the pastoralists have no pasture because of the drought while the farmers have no harvest because their crops are swept away by the floods on an annual basis. The area where the farmers stay is a flood plain, the area is flat for hundreds of kilometres and the river is very old meandering towards the Indian Ocean. Farmers have settled on the river bank and cultivate their crops for their livelihoods there. So it does not need to be raining for the floods to come. When there is rain upstream the river is filled with water from the tributaries and other waters coming from seasonal rivers all converge in an area occupying over 200 metres on either side of the river thus displacing all the farmers without a drop of rain.

I responded to this situation by making emergency interventions for the victims of the drought (Wardei Muslims) and floods (Pokomo both Muslims and Christians). Because the situation was cyclical as a result of climate change, I intensified these interventions with support from the donor community. As the intensity of these interventions continued, the Muslim villages called me and sat me down. They asked me why I was being so generous to them and they wondered aloud if the interventions were geared towards converting them all to the Christian faith. They got very worried since they needed the food and non-food items desperately, yet they loved their religion. We had a long discussion that took weeks as I had to explain to them that the interventions were meant to save lives, because they were in danger of dying from hunger, disease, and malnutrition. I took time to explain to them the “Sphere Standards” and the “Good Enough Guide,” and they understood that it was just like the government or the Red Cross doing an intervention, and so that was the first step towards an interfaith dialogue that I experienced.
We made progress here but the problem now came from the Christians who started wondering why the Muslims were getting the same treatment from us, yet when they had donations from their sources they distributed them only at night to their Muslim brothers. Again, I had to go through the same explanation to make everyone understand that our obligation was to all humanity without discrimination based on creed, race, tribe or color.

Struggling for natural resources brought us even more challenges. The Pokomos who stay along the river and the Wardei who stay in the hinterland share the same river, but the Pokomos claim ownership of the river. This means accessing water in the river is a cause of conflict. The issue becomes even more serious because to access the water the pastoralists must pass through the farmers area since the farmers occupy the entire strip along the river. The government has made corridors called Malkhas through which the pastoralists can pass while going to water their animals. These corridors do not have fences and most of the time it is children who take the animals for watering, with the result that most of the animals end up in the farmers’ plots, destroying entire crops. The farmers’ response is to beat the animals causing death and the conflict deepens. The children take the message back and war breaks out causing death and destruction of property.

In Tana River County ninety percent of the land is trust land, meaning land adjudication has not been done. So the pastoralists can move in any direction and settle anywhere without any documentation. Even the farmers along the river do not have papers for their land. This is a very contentious issue because the rich have demarcated the land into ranches limiting the community to settle in congested traditional/colonial-like villages. The Pokomos claim the land belongs to them and that the Wardei are migrants who came here in the sixties and so have no claim to land ownership. These historical factors continue to bring tension anytime the issue of land is mentioned by any side especially if the Wardei are looking to develop land.

Pasture is another contentious issue because of frequent drought brought about by climate change. Every year the dry months are known to be the conflict months, because animals do not have pasture and the only green areas are along the river and that is a no-go zone, as it is occupied by the Pokomos. One of the challenges here is that it is the children who go to graze the animals; because of the existing prejudices, the children often raise false alarms. The last disaster in 2012 that had over a thousand people killed in tribal clashes was because a boy raised a false alarm, saying the Pokomos had killed some animals and, without verification, war broke out.

Interventions

Faced with all these challenges we decided to intervene with an interreligious dialogue approach. Firstly, we were faced with the problem of the Al Shabaab. This is a national challenge with Kenya going to war in Somalia. At our level the problem of radicalization is real. Religious leaders are very influential and they are close to the people. They are in the mosque and...
church on a daily basis and so they can contribute to a peaceful co-existence. With this in mind, I formed three groups to unveil the puzzle. The first group is that of opinion leaders. We work in fourteen villages so we asked the community to select for us six opinion leaders from each of the fourteen villages. The opinion leaders would be the people that are “gate keepers” of their villages; they are respected and their opinion counts in all the decisions that are made by their community. They speak on behalf of their people and represent their interests in all the meetings. These would be retired teachers or civil servants. They could also be politicians, but since politicians have a bad name as most of them are known as pathological liars, the community keeps them at bay. So opinion leaders include members of the council of elders, respected women, the youth, and people living with disabilities. So this is the composition of opinion leaders from a village, namely one elder, one woman, one youth, and one person with disability, one religious leader, namely the imam, pastor, or catechist and the area chief.

The second group that we formed is that of the peace committees. Here again we asked the community to select eight members from each of the fourteen villages. Out of the eight, three must be women. The criteria for a peace committee member is that they must command respect among the villagers; they must be objective and neutral when solving cases. They must command respect even of the neighboring communities because they might be called to solve a case involving their sworn enemies, and if they are not neutral the other community will refuse to sit in such meetings. It is a voluntary job so no payment is given. It is a job to be done for three years after which a new committee will be selected. So this democratization is for sustainability purposes. The committee then elects its officials and they are encouraged to register with the Social Services as a group, so that they can access support from different sources.

The third group is not very different from the second. These are the paralegals. We asked the community to select for us two paralegals from each of the fourteen villages, (both Wardei and Pokomo villages). The difference here is the paralegal must have passed the fourth form. This is because the kind of work they do and the kind of training they undergo has a lot of legal terminology so they need to be able to understand and speak English. They must be one male and one female from each village. Their main task is to represent their village’s interest in the courts, they will deal with the alternative dispute resolution mechanism, and they will work with the magistrates to pass the point on the interests of their community. Alternative dispute resolution is in the Kenyan constitution.

So we formed these groups and trained them thoroughly for a number of years. These groups then started working as we continued to train them. They turned what used to be a source of conflict into an asset. The relationship with the Muslims improved tremendously and people started seeing each other as brothers and sisters and as same people facing the same problems. They then turned their focus on fighting against poverty. We met severally and discovered many innovative ways we could use to tackle our challenges. One such way was how to prevent the farmers from being killed by crocodiles. This is a big issue here
because literally nearly each family has lost a member through a crocodile attack. The pastoralists also faced the same problem for their animals were also being eaten by crocodiles.

**Results**

From these interventions two results came out that are a lesson for interreligious dialogue. One was that the opinion leaders became more sensitive in their approach to issues that concern the communities. Instead of just defending the interest of their community, they started considering their neighbors also as deserving justice. The religious leaders from the Muslim and the Christian communities became peace ambassadors, preaching peaceful co-existence in their mosques and churches. The preaching during public occasions like weddings and burials focused on what brings us together rather than what divides us.

The second result was that conflicts between the two religions, the two communities, reduced considerably. The peace committees got active, they started resolving the majority of the cases in their villages. They started to command respect from both communities and became a reference point whenever a problem arose. They were given space to be innovative in solving problems. This reduced very much the problems that were reported to the police, because the peace committees were able to solve them. In Duwayo village, the community re-introduced their traditional methods of solving their problems by having a public cell where one is kept for a day when the crime is a public scandal and a disgrace to the community. This reduced petty crimes considerably because once you are in the public cell, which is a pole at the centre of the village. everybody sees you there and it is a shame for you and your family. Your children will want to know what happened and they will cry a lot. So to avoid this kind of a situation, crime in the village has reduced considerably. Again this is just one method the villagers decided to use, and it is working for them.

The third result was that with peaceful co-existence human development became possible. We were able to implement several projects for both the Muslims and the Christians in common farms and groups. We together started drilling wells along the river to pump water using solar energy to supply it to the people for both irrigation and domestic purposes. We rehabilitated water pans for pastoralists. We gave water tanks to the villagers to store the pumped water and use it for drinking. We supplied enough water to areas from 2 to 3.5 kilometres distant from the river. With this intervention, we were able to relocate the farmers from the flood plain. They can produce food throughout the year and have water supply inside the villages and are removed from the danger of crocodiles. Through interreligious dialogue we have been able to change the lives of the most marginalized from abject poverty to sustainable living. That is how after working in this place for the last fourteen years and making such interventions along with many others not mentioned in this paper, I was recognized as a National Hero in Kenya on the Mashujaa Day, on 20 October, 2018.
Conclusion

From this experience, it is clear that interreligious dialogue is a tool for conflict management. It has supported the two communities of Wardei (Muslim) and Pokomo (Christians) to promote peaceful co-existence through common activities in their irrigation schemes. It has enabled them to reduce and resolve a majority of their conflicts without referring them to a higher authority. Thus they have acquired a sustainable peaceful co-existence through this dialogue. Interreligious dialogue has brought hope to the community, a hope that you can live in peace with your neighbors even when you differ in your beliefs. A hope that you will be treated justly by your neighbors and supported when you have problems. Thus, fear has been replaced by hope.

It is also evident that interreligious dialogue breeds values of peace and human development. After a long journey of training, the two communities of Wardei and Pokomos started appreciating each other’s ideas. This led to discussions that yielded a common destiny to solve the problem of food security that was affecting all of them. This enabled the two communities to own the project as a joint one so no one would vandalize it, since it was theirs.

Lastly, interreligious dialogue enhances our sensitivity to the feelings of people of different religions. The power of religion can be used as a major force of unification among different groups, and can play a key role in the promotion of communal peace and reconciliation, by bringing varying groups like the Wardei and the Pokomos together in order to establish and maintain constructive channels of communication and sustainable collaboration. Interreligious dialogue advances world peace by uniting faiths and by fostering reciprocal understanding, acceptance, and tolerance among people of different faiths. Interreligious dialogue breaks down walls of division and barriers that stand at the center of numerous conflicts, with the objective of achieving sustainable peace. People take their religious beliefs very seriously and so issues surrounding religion need to be handled with great care, respect, and tolerance.