Gender Dimension of Ethnic Identities and Conflicts in Kenya: The Case of Bukusu and Sabaot Communities

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Previous studies on ethnic identities and conflicts have not adequately considered the place of gender in the social stratification of the Bukusu and Sabaot communities and its impact on amity and reciprocated existence. Therefore, this thesis examines how the interaction between gender and ethnicity contribute to the construction of ethnic identities and ethnic conflicts, principally how ethnic identities are constructed; reinforced in symbols, myths and rituals; and the interplay of gender and constructed ethnic identities become evident in the struggle for power, resources and ultimately ethnic conflicts between the Bukusu and Sabaot communities. To achieve this objective, the researcher undertook oral interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGDS) in two divisions, Chwele Division (Bungoma District) and Kopsiro Division (Mt Elgon District). Materials were also sourced from secondary literature besides observations made during the field research. Overall, the study utilized Gayatri Chakrovarty Spivak’s subaltern theory. The findings revealed that respondents trace their ethnic identity through men, either the husband or the father, and as such, women do not bestow ethnic identity. Therefore, the construction of ethnic identities is based on the unequal relationships between men and women, and mobilizes men and women to subtly rally against each other. For that reason, identity construction breeds struggles within and between constructed ethnic identities with men projecting the strength of the group through ethnic conflicts. The study further established that constructed ethnic identities are often reinforced through symbols, myths and rituals with noticeable differences being used for purposes of discrimination and stereotypes that in part contribute to tension between identities (intra and inter-ethnic conflicts). Finally, it is evident from the research findings that among the Bukusu and Sabaot communities political power, property ownership, property acquisition, economic roles and external relations with other ethnic identities remain the preserve of men fuelling competition within families, between families, lineages, clans and ethnic groups. With regard to peace building, the exclusion of the female gender is evident in the Bukusu/ Sabaot peace process initiatives. Based on the foregoing findings, a number of recommendations have been made to help peace-building efforts among the Bukusu and the Sabaot. They included the need for effective representation and equal participation of both men and women in peace initiatives and the encouragement of
both men and women to trade with each other and the establishment of a land commission to look into the issue of land tenure and expedite issuance of title deeds for people who bought or were allocated land. Further, there is need to create public awareness so that members of the public could respect valid documents of land ownership, the need to de-link fraternal groups from inheritance, acquisition and ownership of land and other resources, and the need for members of the two communities to strive to identify with the nation as a whole rather than with their particular ethnic groups. A number of areas for further research were identified: a study on how the rise of ethnically-based parties that accompanied multi-partism in Bungoma and Mt. Elgon districts has partly contributed to the presence of very few successful women in elective politics among the Bukusu and the Sabaot; a study on how gender informs trade between the Bukusu and Sabaot communities and thus inter-ethnic relations; and a study on intra-ethnic conflicts among the various Sabaot clans over the distribution of land in the Chebyuk Settlement Scheme.