

Armed conflicts in Kenya : a case study of Maai-Mahiu Division, Naivasha District, Rift Valley Province, 1991-2008

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Abstract:

When the Europeans arrived in Kenya, they set laws and practices that alienated the African communities from their land that they had 'traditionally' inhabited or utilized. While the issue of land fuelled the struggle for independence, the end of colonialism in Kenya did not result in the return of land that had been taken by the European settlers to those whom they had dispossessed. Instead, the newly independent Kenyan government used various methods, some legal, others irregular, to dispose off the land that was owned by the European settlers. This, in addition to other factors, led to the migration of communities into areas that were not their 'traditional lands'. In particular, a significant Kikuyu community moved into land that was 'traditionally' held by the Maasai and Kalenjin communities. In Maai-Mahiu, located in the Rift Valley Province, this clash of interests played out between the Maasai and Kikuyu communities. During the periods of 1991 and 2005, there was recurring conflict that defied the pattern of election-based conflict seen in other parts of Kenya. Even during the 2007 post-election Violence that raged in many parts of Kenya, Maai-Mahiu remained peaceful. These unique conflict cycles in Maai-Mahiu warranted further examination. This study, while acknowledging that the communities in Maai-Mahiu have demonstrated long periods in which they have peacefully co-existed, focused on the years in which violent conflict erupted. To understand the nature of conflict in Maai-Mahiu, the study sought to answer the following questions: What are the underlying causes of conflict in Maai-Mahiu? Why does the conflict keep recurring? What has been the impact of violent conflict on the communities in Maai-Mahiu? Why has conflict in Maai-Mahiu not recurred since 2005? This study offers a scholarly approach to examining the Maai-Mahiu conflict through a historical perspective. The study sought to achieve three main objectives: to investigate the underlying factors that have caused the recurrence of violent conflict in Maai-Mahiu, to determine the level of violence between 1991 and 2005, and to assess the impact of the conflict in Maai-Mahiu on the Maasai and Kikuyu communities. The study sought to test three hypotheses, namely: the conflict in Maai-Mahiu is fuelled mainly by economic factors such as land, the conflict in Maai-Mahiu has negatively affected the Maasai and Kikuyu communities; and that the impact of violence in Maai-Mahiu between 1991 and 2005 resulted in the communities' aversion to conflict since then. The study utilizes both secondary and primary data for its analysis. The secondary data consisting of books, articles and reports that provide the historical context of Maai-Mahiu, its people and their interactions. The primary data consists mostly of informant interviews with elders from the Maasai and Kikuyu communities of Maai-Mahiu, provincial personnel, traders, and other community members. The respondents were selected using the guided sampling method in which one respondent recommends another for the interview. The study used the qualitative method of analysis to analyze the causes of conflict in Maai-Mahiu. This study, using

the Instrumentalist Theory of Identity, argues that the elite members of Maai-Mahiu and neighbouring areas, exploit the real grievances over land that have persisted since the colonial period to mobilize their community along ethnic lines for the purposes of protecting or maintaining their narrow interests. Yet, it is often the non-elite community members of both communities in Maai-Mahiu that bear the costs of violent conflict.