

Kilonzo, Susan M.

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Susan M. Kilonzo

9 The Catholic Church and Psychosocial Support for Survivors of Violent Conflicts in Kenya's North Rift

Abstract

Violent ethnic conflicts have devastating consequences on individuals, families, and communities. The physical, emotional, and psychological trauma that survivors of such conflicts experience can leave lasting scars that would affect their ability to lead healthy and productive lives. However, the community's psychosocial support can play a crucial role in the healing journey of survivors, particularly when provided from a religious perspective. Recent studies show that religion and spirituality help improve health indicators in patients, although this improvement may vary across illnesses and patients. From evidence of field work done between 2018–2020 on the Catholic Church's role in Peacebuilding, this chapter explores the way in which Church's community engagement, contribute towards psychological and/or trauma healing, for survivors of violent ethnic conflicts in Kenya's North Rift. The chapter uses a number of narratives from emergent themes from field data, as well as literature review. Data was gathered through focus group discussions, observation, and in-depth oral interviews. The arguments centre on the relevance of religious activities, and importance of community support systems in providing a sense of safety, belonging, and empowerment to survivors of violence. The support systems are in the form of support groups and therapy spaces, which are largely hinged on the theory of social capital, and the theory of contact. Ultimately, the chapter shows that a holistic approach to healing integrates psychosocial, religious/spiritual, and communal dimensions to provide a viable framework for supporting survivors of violent ethnic conflicts.

Keywords: *Catholic Church, Community Support Systems, Social Capital, Theory of Contact, Psychosocial Support, Violent Conflicts*

1. Introduction

The presentation of this chapter is methodologically conceptual and analytical, though with a few snippets of empirical data. It is geared towards engaging the role of religion in psychosocial support of survivors in the aftermath of violent conflicts. While the circumstantial focus of the chapter is Kenya's North Rift, where the author has been researching on how non-state actors assist in peacebuilding, the chapter also takes a broader perspective that allows for an analysis of the Catholic Church's frameworks that contribute to psychosocial support for survivors of violent ethnic conflicts. Specifically, the interest is in interrogating how those who have undergone violent conflicts relate not just to religion, but also use religion as an institution of psychosocial healing. Largely, the chapter looks at the institutional role of the Catholic Church, thus, religion as an agency in psychosocial support of survivors of violent conflicts.

Psychosocial support in the context of this chapter relates to the facets that enable cognitive, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of survivors of violent conflicts. These facets relate to love, care, provision, and protection of the survivors, either by use of the agency that is religion, or by encouraging the community members to engage in activities that enhance these facets. These activities and processes are aimed at improving the wellbeing of individuals and communities holistically, while helping with the integration process that allows for normalcy after the effects of violence including life and material loss, and trauma of those affected. Psychosocial support speaks to processes that enable individuals and communities going through difficult situations to build resilience through available institutions in the society. The term depicts the need for those going through different crises, to engage with their local environment and communities through the available structures that contribute towards a hope for a better future and social connectedness, as snippets from a past research will show.

The research on the Catholic Church and their work on peacebuilding was carried out in West Pokot, Elgeyo Marakwet, Turkana, Uasin Gishu and Nandi counties in the period between September 2018 and March 2020. Although the research largely focused on peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts, survivors' psychosocial needs and their struggles seemed to

be an emergent theme. From the preliminary leads, and especially focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII) data, analysis is made to show how mobilization for peacebuilding within communities provide support systems for the psychosocial needs of survivors of violence. It should be clarified that the said research's objective was to survey, and document evidence of the Catholic Church's peacebuilding efforts, and projects thereof. Subsequently, the chapter uses anecdotal evidence from the research to argue for further research and strengthened efforts by the Church and other agencies working in the area, on this challenge, that a wide array of literature seems to flag.

The communities in Kenya's North Rift region are largely pastoral (Leff, 2009), although there are pockets where agriculture is widely practised especially in the Uasin Gishu, Nandi and Elgeyo Marakwet counties. While in some pockets of the region conflicts are purely defined by historical wars on access and ownership to land (Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022), in other cases, the conflicts are largely among pastoral communities resulting from a number of factors. For the pastoral groups, their economic activities are largely defined by the wellbeing of their livestock (Andebo & Kibet, n.d.). Ironically, the area is the poorest in the country (Mkutu & Wandera, 2016), as it seems to be quite marginalized (Olsson, Eklundh & Ardö, 2005), and indeed suffers the worst of droughts in the country, leading to recurrent loss of their herds (Witsenburg & Adano, 2009; Bolton, 2017). These droughts are related to the global and local changes in climate (Boko et al., 2007; Andebo and Kibet, n.d). The loss of herds of sheep, goats and cattle in the areas that are hit hard by climate change in a way necessitates replenishing (Bollig, 1990; Boko et al., 2007) through what was culturally known as cattle rustling and originally used as game of power (Bolton, 2017; Bollig, 2009). Many pastoralist communities in the region traditionally raided cattle from other communities to build or restock herds. This was done in a way that was stealth, and if need be, with traditional weapons (or none), constraining violence to low levels (Bolton, 2017). This has since changed due to economic hardships. Most raids now leave victims dead, physically challenged, and in economic want (Bolton, 2017; Leff, 2009; Halden, 2007, Olsson, Eklundh & Ardö, 2005; Mahmoud, 2011; Scilling, Opiyo & Scheffran, 2016; de Vries, Leslie & McCabe, 2006).

Scholarly work now shows that cattle raids have become quite fatal and are seriously threatening the lives of communities that are affected in a myriad of ways. Bolton argues that while traditional cattle raiding in East Africa was driven by concerns of raising dowry, replenishing stocks, demonstrating bravery, and taking revenge, this has changed in the last three decades (Bolton, 2017). Raiding has now transformed into a commercialized illicit cattle trade (Bolton, 2017). With the economic and climate crises in the region (Leff, 2009; Boko et al., 2007; Mahmoud, 2011; SRIC, 2016; Greiner, 2013), the raiding of cattle has intensified, and is complicated by presence of arms (Mkutu, 2007). Given the area's location, where raiders can access three international borders of Uganda, Ethiopia and Somalia with ease, regional organized crime is eminent. Raiders can easily find regional central marketplaces to launder the stolen cattle as Bolton (2017) explains. In fact, there remains to be a causal link between the movement of cattle, arms, and other illicit goods (Bolton, 2017; Leff, 2009; Mkutu, 2006; Mkutu, 2008; Eaton, 2008; Bevan, 2007). Further, given the involvement of high-level political leaders profiting from this illicit trade (Mkutu, 2007; Mkutu, 2008; Bolton, 2017; Bollig, 1990), the cattle raiders raid with impunity as they enjoy the protection of these leaders. The raiders have now turned into organized militias (Bolton, 2017; Leff, 2009), who are heavily armed, and pose a threat to the limited security personnel in the region, given its marginalization.

Given these developments, it is clear now that the traditional customary norms that constrained violence through local peace pacts which took care of the extremes of raids have now diminished. Other scholars argue that the traditional leaders and systems that were once respected and would control conflicts have slowly waned (Devine, 2016) with the leaders accused of conniving with the warriors for raids and benefiting from the trade of stolen livestock (Bollig, 1990). Further, the systems of common pasture regulation (Bolton, 2017) that once existed to regulate the communal land are no longer given much attention.

Research warns against reading pastoralist conflict through the lens of "culture", that is, pathologizing nomadic and semi-nomadic people as inherently problematic (Devine, 2016; Bolton, 2017; Greiner, 2013), where rustlers steal from their "enemies" as a way of retaliation, gaming, and a means to acquire more, mainly to pay dowry and debts (Bolton, 2017).

This however does not imply that the conflicts happen without a cultural context. The caution is on understanding the dynamics of cattle rustling and the contexts that complicate the vice. Bolton (2017) and Greiner (2013) further indicate that pastoralist conflict is often misrepresented as a localized, outmoded and “primitive” practice of “cattle rustling,” yet pastoralist conflict is often a manifestation of broader conflicts in the region’s “peripheries” and overlaps with marginalization, tensions over power, wildlife conservation, climate change issues that affect access to pasture and water. Other scholars link the conflicts to a wider continental picture of many and complex reasons for conflicts in Africa, including inadequate governance, rampant corruption, heavy dependence on natural resources and ongoing cycles of violent conflict (Halden, 2007; Olsson, Eklundh & Ardö, 2005).

Picking an example of Turkana and West Pokot; the two counties share one of the longest borderlines in Kenya, which has been described as a conflict corridor. The borderline, as Shalom-SCCRR (2020) explains, is predominantly inhabited by the pastoralist from both the Turkana and Pokot communities who have over the years been in conflicts over cattle raids (Devine, 2016; Kratli & Swift, 1999; Eaton, 2008). The conflict hot spots along the borderline are Loima Sub-County, Turkana South Sub-County, Pokot Central Sub-County, and Pokot North Sub-County. The causes of inter-communal conflict along the Turkana-West Pokot borderline are a result of intricate factors that include governance policies, socio-economic and political marginalization, availability of illegal arms, competition over natural resources, inadequate land tenure system, insecurity, inadequate utilization of traditional mechanisms for addressing conflict among many other factors (Shalom-SCCRR, 2020; Devine, 2016; Kermut, 2016; Okumu, 2013). These different factors explain the structural nature of the conflicts (Devine, 2016).

Since the conflicts have been going on for a while and in fact may be termed as the most persistent in the history of Kenya (Devine, 2016), once in a while, the government uses the military for disarmament. The process is always brutal, not just to the gangs and bandits, but also the communities as they are coerced and forced to provide information on the targeted groups. This is more devastating given that some of the community members have already suffered losses of their cattle, injuries, and

death of their loved ones during the raids. Some of the most affected are the old, children, women, and the defence teams that are mainly made up of the youth. The violence, theft and continued fights result in loss of lives, massive loss of livestock, displacement of people, weakened inter-communal relations, disruption to socio-economic activities and livelihood systems, destruction and closure of education facilities, stalled development among many other negative effects. Further, the few communities engaged in agricultural activities are hindered from accessing large areas of pasture, water, and fertile agricultural lands during and after the conflicts (Shalom-SCCRR, 2020). Besides breeding personal and social hatred, these effects contribute to futile efforts towards reconciliation, and affect the broader agenda of social cohesion (Gathogo, 2012). The largely unspoken, invisible and unaddressed resultant effects of these conflicts is trauma, fear, and depression that affect the survivors' psychological and emotional lives. This is a silent distractor of individuals' self-esteem, and the development process.

There have been sporadic efforts to support the survivors when and where conflicts happen, although the help is never enough. Most of these efforts seem to focus on humanitarian assistance (Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022, Kilonzo & Onkware, 2020, Shalom-SSCCR, 2020, Devine, 2016). This then implies that the psychosocial and emotional needs of the affected communities are hardly given attention. Some institutions, like the Church though, live within these communities. In fact, one may argue that the community members are the Church. This then speaks to dual perspectives of providing support. The spiritual as well as social/communal support, by either the Church leadership and members, as well as the larger community to those suffering diverse mental and emotional challenges. But is this the case? The sections below explain this.

2. Psychosocial Support and Religion

Religion can simply be defined as an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent [God, higher power, or ultimate truth/reality] (Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001). This implies that there is some form of a structure that defines what constitutes religion. This is unlike spirituality,

which mainly focuses on individual's belief practices that need no approval from a structured system. Studies in the mid and late 19th Century proved that religion is important for mental health. It would be associated with positive mental, physical, and emotional health outcomes (Cohen & Koenig, 2004; Moreira-Almeida, Koenig & Lucchetti, 2014). This is unlike before when religion was associated with psychotic episodes and negatively associated with mental health (Cohen & Koenig, 2004).

Although some studies show that for mental health patients who attributed first-episode psychosis to supernatural causes or consulted a traditional healer before presenting to formal mental health services had more negative symptoms and spent longer without formal treatment (Burns, 2012), the question for low income and resource settings, would be, what options do these patients have? It is even more challenging for survivors of violence, or those still undergoing violence, with no help from the state. How often do these victims of violence think through the pain and suffering and the questions that require answers for their challenges? What are their chances of survival? How can their situations be located within religious perspective with an aim of getting help? This chapter focuses on these questions to provide a framework through which the Church and community members think through the psychosocial challenges posed by conflicts, and hinge on the facets available for support.

On the overall, psychosocial support for the survivors of violence contribute to greater achievements of mental health, which, according to WHO, "is a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community" (WHO, 2014, p. 14). It is proven that psychological factors may involve stressful events that may be contributory factors to psychosocial disorders (WHO, 2001; WHO, 2021). Subsequently, the chapter is right to point out that the challenges that are experienced by the survivors of violent conflicts in the North Rift face major psychosocial challenges that require institutional attention and support. It is also evidenced that mental health-related challenges affect 65% of people living in the rural areas in most African countries (Aderinto, Opanike & Oladipo, 2022). It is in these areas where communities are marginalized and living in extreme poverty. Omigbodun, Ryan, Fazoranti, et al. argue that people with psychological

challenges, and their families, are threatened by poverty and their very survival remains on the line (Omigbodun, Ryan, Fasoranti et al., 2023). Without some form of tangible support, the situation remains catastrophic.

But what evidences the need for psychosocial support systems among survivors of violent conflicts in Kenya, and particularly this region? The African Region has an average of 1.6 mental health workers per 100 000 population compared to 13 mental health workers per 100 000 at the global level (WHO, 2022). There are mental health policies and strategic plans in 76% of Member States, up by 4% from 2017 (WHO, 2020; WHO, 2022). Regardless, only 14 people per 100,000 visit outpatient mental health facilities in Africa, compared to the recommended global estimates of 1051 per 100,000 people (Aderinto, Opanike & Oladipo, 2022), with an average of 1.6 mental health workers per 100 000 population compared to 13 mental health workers per 100 000 at the global level (WHO, 2022).

In Kenya, there is no mental health surveillance system (Jaguga & Kwobah, 2020), yet the prevalence rates of mental disorders range from 29% to 56.3% (Aillon et al., 2014; Jenkins et al., 2015; Ndetei et al., 2016). There is only one psychiatrist for every 500,000 Kenyans (Office of the Auditor General, 2018), and less than 68 (1%) of healthcare facilities in Kenya that can deliver some form of mental health service (Office of the Auditor General, 2018). The situation is worse in rural areas, where basic healthcare facilities are a challenge to find, and lack the necessary services.

In low resource settings, as the statistics above have shown, most people with psychological needs receive no treatment and care. Compared to cancer and other diseases, such illnesses are largely neglected. It may be argued that the cultural perception of mental health issues relates the condition to traditions of witchcraft and/or a connection to the spiritual concerns (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo, 2013). Subsequently, when one is undergoing extreme stress that may lead to psychotic episodes, and to a point that they cannot be able to engage with everyday activities in a normal way, one would culturally be described as mad or “possessed”. Such people in most cases may visit a religious leader for counselling and/or prayers, or a traditional healer for diagnosis and treatment/healing (Burns, 2013; Amuyunzu-Nyamongo, 2013). Their families too may call for spiritual help from religious leaders or cultural intervention by traditional healers.

This is especially so in the rural areas where the communities might not only be unaware of health interventions that address these concerns, but also, the health facilities specializing in mental health issues are also lacking.

Stigma is also a factor that affects the health-seeking behaviours of the patients. Since communities view psychological illnesses as related to spiritual attacks, and in certain instances relate these to witchcraft, those going through these challenges are likely to face discrimination from their families and close community networks. Therefore, it remains relevant for the Church to not just provide enablers for psychological, but also social support. The latter is more relevant for direct therapy to the challenges the survivors of violence are facing, as seen in the different activities by the communities as supported by the Catholic Church below.

3. The Catholic Church's Role in Psychosocial Support

From the field data, some of the highlights that indicate the need for psychosocial support included the following voices:

“I know he [referring to her neighbour] and others who were in his company, stole my cows and destroyed my property. I have deliberated on hiring thugs to kill him because I cannot live to see him every other day, and he is just free.” (Part of a story of a middle-aged woman during a FGD at Burnt Forest, in October 2018).

“I lost my husband and a child to the violence. I am just tired. See now I am living as a squatter yet my family had land. Sometimes I feel that it might be better not to live. Death might take away all the pain.” (A middle-aged woman during an FGD at Sacred Heart Cathedral, Eldoret November 2018).

“They [referring to perpetrators of violence] raped my physically challenged daughter and my wife. They beat them up and tied them leaving them helpless. I was away at work at the time and I could not help my family. We were separated for over a month as they suffered the ordeal. Tell me, which man does not protect his family. How am I supposed to live with myself?” (A 36-year-old male during an in-depth oral interview at the Sacred Heart Cathedral in October 2018).

“This war will never end. We expect it every time and again, especially when there are political triggers. How long are we going to live in fear? How many of our people can we watch die every time there is war?” (A middle-aged man in an FGD on 13 September 2018, at St. Patrick Catholic Church, Burnt Forest).

“Our people are not fine. If someone lost a house, children, husband, wife or a relative; if they were physically assaulted, raped or sodomised; if their property was destroyed and they are struggling to make ends meet; if they live in fear; and all the problems associated with the conflicts, what can you tell them to heal quickly. It is not easy. It is a process that takes long. As Church leaders we try, but it is difficult. They are hurting.” (Njoki, not her real name, a secretary to one of the Catholic church parishes, and a coordinator of PCPs activities in a KII at St. Patrick Catholic Church, Burnt Forest 14 September 2018).

From the past research, these are just a few indications that psychosocial needs are dire, and although the Church and other agents might be targeting the physical needs of the survivors, the psychosocial needs require attention.

For conflict resolution and peacebuilding among the warring communities, the Catholic Church has worked through a model, the *Amani Mashinani* Model, that has 12 steps. These include: Analysis, intervention and interruption of the conflicts; protection, sanctuary and relief; one-to one meetings with community leaders/representatives; enlarged meetings of small to small-group with wider representation; sharing of food as a symbol of agreement to begin dialogue; intra-ethnic meetings; airing of grievances from the conflicting sides; preparation of the agenda and inter-ethnic meetings; reporting back and caucusing with communities; peace connector projects; social contracts; and, monitoring and ongoing development of the agenda (Korir, 2009; Kilonzo & Onkware, 2020; Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022). Although not clearly pronounced, embedded within these twelve steps are enablers of spiritual and psychosocial support. The section below will pick a few and exemplify and cite voices of those that have benefited from the in-direct psychosocial support activities resulting from the model. This is to show that the Church has the potential to build a more comprehensive framework for psychosocial support.

3.1 Protection and Sanctuary

Most conflicts in the area will lead to displacement. Both past and recent conflicts have meant that most of those affected relocate to safer places or take refuge in churches or police stations. With such displacements, daily activities are affected. Children are unable to attend classes, and their parents as well unable to undertake their everyday activities. At times, the attacks are characterised by torching of houses, killings, and maiming. The deaths and destruction of property, especially people's homes cause deep trauma to those affected. From the study findings, the Catholic Church is said to provide temporary sanctuary, which partly relieves the survivors. In the churches, the survivors receive humanitarian aid, and through the priests and nuns, receive some form of counselling. The survivors also build some form of agency because they are able to share their problems, and although they may not have solutions to the same, the dialoguing and airing of their traumatic experiences is therapeutic. Bringing the survivors together is therefore one way of enhancing community dialogue through the Church's theory of contact, which the leadership believes is resourceful in many ways. In an interview in 2019 at the Sacred Heart Cathedral, a lady survivor who was once hosted in the Church, and now attends services at the Church explained:

“For us to be here, it meant that we had lost almost everything, and we knew when we go back to our homes, there would be nothing waiting for us. We were however lucky that there is a place like this where we could hide our children as we waited to see what happened next. Here we were not afraid, and we could sleep, even if it was on the floor, but knowing that we were safe. We also had sessions with the priest and nuns who were talking to us, and we appreciated their concern. It helped a little.” (O.I. 5/2/2019).

This reprieve, even though for a short while, at the height of violence, was useful to the survivors. However, it also implies some interventions like providing temporary sanctuary, are short-lived for trauma patients, and the institutions involved may have extra responsibilities integrating affected community members fully, as well as follow-up on their mental health.

3.2 Peace Connector Projects (PCPs)

One way in which integration can be attained is through establishment of long-term peace-connector projects (simply referred to as PCPs). These, although from face-value may seem to be economic ventures to revive and replenish what was lost through the conflicts, they serve a number of important purposes. The theory of contact, as the Church argues, is meant to ensure that members of the community, especially those warring, remain in touch, and can dialogue in diverse ways. The dialogue process is key because it relieves the psychological pain and reminds communities that they are still human beings, and, they have a shared future. The PCPs, are also meant to disrupt the conflicts. Through the projects, communities are reminded of more important things than war. The founding Bishop of the *Amani Mashinani* model, the late Cornelius Korir, is cited as having often said “How long will you fight? You may pose a little while to plant because a hungry stomach need food. Not war. Once you plant you can continue with the fight as the crops grow.” (Korir, 2009; Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022). Of course, one would clearly see that once the fight is disrupted by planting, the warring groups would not go back to war immediately after planting, and as such, the Bishop would distribute planting seeds, in a process where he would ensure that the warring groups shared seeds from one container. This is a way of psychologically disrupting those involved in killings and destruction of property and reminding them of useful involvements. It is a psychological approach to ending war. The idea of PCPs playing the role of bringing the warring parties together for dialogue to take effect also serves as a psychological and emotional support space and for continued peacebuilding. If well-organized, the PCPs harbour in them the potential to support those who need mental and emotional therapy; but if not watched, can also turn out to spaces for extreme hatred. Take an example of common cattle dips and common schools that the Church either re-innovated or built, along the borders of the warring communities (Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022). The idea is that community members must meet in, or around these facilities. During parents’ meetings in the schools, the parents from both sides are able to communicate on matters affecting their children. Similarly, the youth taking care of the cattle, and the elders manning the cattle dips have to talk when they meet around the cattle dips (Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022). This

is part of dialogue processes that in the end may create an avenue for conflict resolution and peacebuilding process. The dialogue sessions are also moments of therapy. Management of these facilities therefore become key if there has to be notable benefits, especially for trust that is important for healing of the survivors of violence.

The PCPs bring community members together to enumerate their problems and discuss workable solutions. In one of such meetings, the most pressing need identified was lack of houses for survivors whose houses had been torched during the violent encounter. The communities then resolved to build houses and/or re-innovate those that had been partly destroyed, with the help of the Church, (Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022). Such actions that allow for expression of the power of social capital also act as foundations for trust for those undergoing traumatic experiences since both perpetrators and survivors are involved in the rebuilding and/or re-innovation of the houses. This, in a way serves to stabilize the relationships among communities.

Other PCPs include connector bridges across rivers or small valleys, where they never existed before. These are targeted at villages occupied by communities of different ethnicities, as a way of encouraging dialogues. They are symbolic, that is, indicate that each side of the divide is welcome to visit the other and begin conversations of healing and peacebuilding (Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022). This therefore implies an indirect way for the communities to forge a way forward and deal with the traumas that affect them.

3.3 Merry-go-round and Table Banking

Closely related to the PCPs, although an activity that is run purely by the community members without the intervention of the Church are merry-go-rounds and table banking. The Britannica Dictionary defines merry-go-round as “a large round platform that turns around in a circle and has seats and figures of animals (such as horses) on which children sit for a ride”. In the context of human activities referred to here, it is a terminology that literally translates to happiness going round the circle. A group with a common interest of benefiting each other agrees to pull certain resources together whenever they meet, or at an agreed time, and through an agreed format, distribute these resources to groups’ members. It builds

on the concept of social capital that allows for members to use their available resources to help those that are challenged.

The activities vary from farming, where members of the group help each other in farm work in turns, thus labour as a resource; to contribution of resources such as domestic animals, kitchenware, food, and money, among others. For money as a merry-go-round activity, there is a wide practise called table banking. In this case, members meet on the specified day and contribute money around a table/sitting (thus the coinage, table banking), which is immediately loaned out to individuals who are in need, and in turn, they pay with small interest. In every sitting, the collected money may be loaned out in entirety, or whatever is not loaned out, may be deposited in the group's bank account. The loanees agree to pay back the money during similar meetings, around the table/sitting, without fail, and with a little specified interest. There is no collateral needed for these loans, and members act as each other's surety (Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022). This is a form of trust that enables the members not just to work on social modalities (unwritten constitution), but also have relationships that are built on trust. Woven around this is trust; it is social and psychological therapy. Members who at one point were the worst of enemies, can forge relationships, on their own, and under their own defined unwritten "constitutions" to help each other through their social and economic challenges.

Most of the communities visited had these group activities running, and members explained that benefits spanned beyond economic gains. The cohesive role played by these activities, which then build some form of trust among the members, was hailed. This in the end has a positive influence on the survivors' mental health. Getting into a merry-go-round or table banking group is some form of signing of a contract where members agree to work with each other towards a common goal. Although the contract is not to resolve the underlying issues of conflicts, it signifies a serious process of engaging in dialogue, and also solving the social and economic challenges. Implied in this is a process of healing from fear, hatred and trauma, since such forums provide an avenue for storytelling, consulting, borrowing of ideas, and in the end, trust.

3.4 Social Contracts

These are both formal and informal agreements made between individuals, groups, or communities, to either work together in harmony, or to engage in certain activities that are deemed relevant for peacebuilding. This is the second last stage of the peacebuilding model by the church. This implies that it may take a while before social contracts of any nature can be signed because for any parties to sign these, there has to be trust. Trust is built over a long period of time, and subsequently, these seem to be long term solutions for survivors of psychosocial problems. Further, it can only be perceived that within and outside the confines of these agreements are just possibilities of psychosocial and spiritual support activities. This is because the activities are not specifically tailored for mental, emotional, and psychological support, although they have a component of social integration as seen in intermarriages and oath-taking forms explained below.

3.5 Intermarriages

The intermarriages happen among the ethnic groups that live in this area, and who also are engaged in the conflicts (Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022). The research participants argued that when there are intermarriages between the ethnic groups, it is a ray of hope that the communities will be enjoined and enjoy some kind of intercultural unity. It is a way of signing a social contract of friendship, of closer relations. Although this may be a long-term, and an indirect intervention, it gives a promising hope and future for those going through psychosocial instabilities. Literature shows that in traditional society set-up, marriages are a way of resolving conflicts, and building long-lasting peace (Eze & Okey-Agbo, 2016). This may apply to date since from the research, participants seemed to support ethnic intermarriages as a way of uniting the families and the two communities at large. They argued that it could be a long-lasting move towards healing.

3.6 Oath-taking

An oath is a solemn declaration that mainly invokes God or spiritual world. This means that they are binding and there are consequences that result from violation of the declarations. According to Burkert, “The function of an oath is to guarantee that a statement is absolutely binding,

whether it be a statement about something in the past or a declaration of an intent for the future.” (Burkert, 1985, p. 250). Oaths, therefore, are serious forms of social contracts. They are so serious that communities are hesitant to jump into signing them, and therefore there has to be a form of negotiations and a series of events, meetings and well-laid down ways in which this should happen.

Oath-taking in the context of spiritual and psychosocial support was demonstrated in the sense in which the Church was willing to bend ways in which it operates to accommodate culture. In one of the research sites during data collection in 2018, one of the priests in the churches we visited was preparing for oath-taking for warriors from two different ethnic groups, which to them meant the need for a complete end of war (Onkware and Kilonzo 2022). For the two communities, getting into a social contract therefore indicated possibility of an end to an era of hostility. Although this may not seem to be directly related to addressing of psychological torture that the survivors of violence go through every time there is a conflict, a closer analysis shows that it can be a permanent solution towards attaining a solution to the violence. Although research shows that these conflicts are persistent in the region that is characterised by different ethnic groups (Devine, 2016; Mkutu, 2008; Eaton, 2008), peace, that contributes to psychological tranquillity may begin just with a few peace agreements, such as through oath-taking, among a few communities, which can then extend to others.

3.7 Prayer and Worship Groups

Literature has shown that those undergoing psychological problems in Africa are faced with the dilemmas of cultural beliefs and stigmatization (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo, 2020). Further, they lack sensitization and enough health facilities that can deal with mental/psychiatric problems (Burns, 2012). This is coupled with lack of resources (Aderinto, Opanike & Oladipo, 2022; WHO, 2022). The easy and readily available help is religion (Burns, 2012). It is a therapy to their psychological challenges. This can be in the form of individual or prayers and worship. It can also be in the form of individual visits to the Church leaders, and/or invitation of these leaders to the affected homes, for prayers and counselling. For the perpetrators of violence, the psychological disturbances may be resolved

through “cleansing” or “exorcism”. Reviewed literature shows that some of the religious and spiritual activities associated with positive mental health include: attendance of services, religious activities – private or group - which may include prayer, singing, scripture reading, feeling of connection with a high power, religious beliefs (Cohen & Koenig, 2004, p. 255).

For group meetings, these are organized in the churches at specified days. They are meant not just for prayer but also for socialization. The members are also encouraged to meet in their small Christian communities (SCCs). These are the smallest cells that serve as the family cell of the church for pastoral work. They then report their activities, needs and concerns to the Church and when necessary, to sub-parishes, parishes, and dioceses. In the field, these were highlighted as the starting points of peace connector projects, whereby those meeting, besides prayer and worship, come up with development ideas on how to better themselves socially and economically. Once such dialogue begins, therapy among those with psychosocial challenges is on course.

In some other related meetings, the church would organize for prayers and worship, and sharing of meals. This involves the broader community, not just church membership. Since the Catholic Church serves not on an ethnic but communal basis, all community members attend the meetings. They argued that besides the activities of the meetings, which are prayer, singing and worship, the meetings are important spaces for starting dialogue, sharing of burdens, and charting the way forward for peace, which is important for their psychological and emotional stability. One such example given was an activity that involved two ethnic groups at the border of Pokots and Marakwets, where they came together for prayers and worship, then made a huge cross as a sign of agreement and placed it on top of the highest hill. They named this place Kapsait Lady Queen of Peace. On January 1, members of both communities join in a procession to the cross on the hill to celebrate the peace success stories. They slaughter animals donated from both sides to celebrate as they hold interdenominational prayers (Kilonzo & Onkware, 2022, p. 198). This is therapeutic for those who have gone through psychosocial challenges in the past. St. Paul in 1st Thessalonians 5:16 encourages all to rejoice even in the hardest of circumstances. Iwański refers to it as “Rejoice Therapy” (Iwański,

2023), and such short moments of celebration and unity are significant in giving hope to the desolate.

4. Conclusion

The chapter has explored various ways in which the Catholic Church encourages communities to engage in activities that directly or indirectly contribute to the psychosocial needs of survivors of violent conflicts in some of the affected areas in the North Rift region of Kenya. Although these are emergent ways from data gathered from a large study on the role of Church in peacebuilding activities in the area, the argument the chapter makes is that institutions that work to resolve conflicts and provide support to communities going through conflicts, should work to provide services beyond the immediate physical needs. Mental/psychosocial and social needs are important. Going forward, there is a need to consider a holistic approach that targets not just the visible losses but also the psychosocial and emotional trauma of the survivors.

The chapter further argues that the Church, and religion in general seems to have an advantage of trust from the community members transitioning from conflicts. This advantage may be useful in a number of ways: first, to the Church itself, since it is a community/grassroot institution, and as such in a position to build communities of practice that are more in touch with the challenges facing survivors; second, it may act as a mediator between the communities and/or survivors, with other agents of change, include state agencies, and provide important networks and connections that are beneficial for sustained psychosocial support. Here, we would argue that the Church is the community. This is to say that churches are made up of community members, and this gives the Church leadership an advantage in understanding the challenges within these communities. Some of the mechanisms used, such as the SCCs and PCPs evidence the ease with which the Church can penetrate into the communities, and subsequently, how feasible the Church can be an agent through which other institutions gain entry and trust from the survivors of violent conflicts. These are valuable access points in addressing psychosocial needs of survivors of violent conflicts.

Finally, the chapter argues that there is need for more psychosocial targeted solutions that are not assumed within the existing peacebuilding mechanisms. This is to say that more methodical efforts need to be made to focus on the silent, but fatal challenge of mental health in general. These should categorically be substantiated from efforts that address the material needs, so that survivors understand where they can seek for help, and what institutional mechanisms support psychological issues. However, this is not to say that the latter should be at the detriment of material support. The two are interrelated as the chapter has already shown, and a holistic approach will be viable, within non-state actors and government facilities.

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