



“The wetland is our cooking pot”: Implications of latent symbolism of Language use on persistent conflicts in transboundary wetlands in Uganda

Constance Mudondo

Department of Adult and Community Education, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, cmudondo@cees.mak.ac.ug

Dauda Waiswa Batega

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda

Robert Kabumbuli

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Makerere University Kampala, Uganda

Abstract

It is widely accepted that high competition over transboundary resources creates conflicts between competing parties. Although such conflicts may differ greatly in nature and dimension, often times they result from what competing parties do and say. While the actions attract a lot of attention from the public, less attention is given to the symbolic expressions used by conflicting communities. Using the transboundary conflicts in Namatala wetland in Eastern Uganda, this paper examines the language used by conflicting communities and highlights the symbolism embedded in the language. The study adopted a qualitative approach with 8 focus group discussions and 12 key informant interviews. Results indicate that language is used to depict power differences, social class struggles and uncertainty about their future. The article illustrates how such symbolism contributes to the persistence of the conflict. Therefore, it is important to understand the expression of feelings attached to the resource in order to get meaningful and sustainable mechanisms of managing the conflict.

Key words: Latent symbolism, Language use, Transboundary, Persistent conflicts, Wetlands

Introduction

Transboundary Protected areas (TBPAs) are increasingly becoming conflict ridden but how and why they occur differ considerably depending on contextual dynamics that shape the conflict (Büscher, 2018; Chaudoin, Peskowitz, & Stanton, 2017; Medeiros, 2017). Transboundary protected areas in this paper refer to any preserved land resource that connects to more than one sovereign land (Sandwith, Hamilton, & Sheppard, 2001). Oftentimes, such conflicts emanate from what competing parties do and say against each other in the quest for access to, control and use of the transboundary resource. In spite of that, the manifestations are not uniform.

Whereas there is debate on how conflicts transform, some scholars suggest that many of such conflicts are sequential in occurrence, commencing with incompatibility in interests over the resource between the sharing communities (Coleman, Vallacher, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2007; Yasmi, Schanz, & Salim, 2006). Invariably, initial phases entail latent symptoms such as suspicion, feelings of threat, fear and simple talk about their discrepancies (Mayer, 2000); and oftentimes, these are only visible to those within the communities (Lombard & Rakodi, 2016). But despite the subtlety, such symptoms signify that the relationship between the communities sharing the resource is fractured. Failure to address such subtle indicators sometimes translates into violence. When the conflicts become violent, there is increased tension, aggression, competition and the expressions are observable by

outsiders (Eck, 2014; Lombard & Rakodi, 2016). Such intensity attracts attention from the public, and relevant authorities. The attention may culminate into end of violence and animosity (Wohlfeld, 2010), however before, during and after the violence, there is language used by conflicting communities that carry a lot of connotations.

Language is a system in which communities share information and ideas (Osimen, Aniga, & Bateye, 2015) and is a powerful tool through which people share meanings, shape thoughts and the interaction process (Timothy, 2016). Language may take on active and passive roles. The passive role is when it is used as a medium, but the active role is when the words represent the power of the speaker to create emotive feelings (Hassen, 2016). In this article, concern is on the active role of language, specifically focusing on expressions conflicting communities use against each other and their meaning/interpretation by the same communities. The active role of language can be twofold. It may be significant in conflict management, as well as conflict escalation (Mayer, 2000; Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012; Paul, Geddes, Jones, & Donohue, 2016). This implies that depending on how language is used, it may yield positive or negative results for the communities in conflict.

Literature that depicts language use as instrumental in conflict management suggests that it can reconcile conflicting parties (Mayer, 2000; Osimen et al., 2015), it can heal the emotional wounds of conflicting groups (Bar-Tal, Oren, & Nets-Zehngut, 2014) and it is an important tool in achieving sustainable conflict resolution (Osimen et al., 2015). However, literature that illuminates the escalating role of language use in a conflict suggests that it energizes group members by stressing their groups' ill-treatment (Bar-Tal et al., 2014; Radnitz, 2018). It is also used to share historical and existing conflict supporting narratives (Bar-Tal et al., 2014); to mobilise groups to execute massive violence (Mabry, 2010; Osimen et al., 2015); and it is used to blame and label others (Putnam & Shoemaker, 2007). While the role of language use in escalating conflicts is well documented; the symbolism imbued in language use by conflicting communities is hardly highlighted. K. Carter and Aulette (2009) argue that language can be used to reflect existing inequalities. While Adjei (2013) augments that it is used to describe the social reality in which people live. This therefore implies that the social context is important in determining how people construct and interpret language.

Therefore, the social context of conflicts such as that found in Namatala transboundary wetland is essential in how language is constructed, used and interpreted. The conflicts in Namatala wetland have historical elements which date way back in the colonial rule when political boundaries between Bugisu and Bugwere districts were adjusted several times during the formation of Bukedi district in 1902 (Khanakwa, 2012). But besides the history, the area has multiple ethnic groups sharing the wetland; but none of them has the legal right to use the wetland. Further, the perceived borderline by the communities is a seasonal river that changes course depending on the season. These dynamics create competing claims of certain parts of the wetland resulting into bitter exchange of words and derogatory language. In such contexts, the construction and use of language may intend to assert, reaffirm and express historical and current claims over the wetland, but the interpretations may have deeper and indigenous sociocultural meanings that reflect perceived power differences, social class differences between competing communities and fears on loss of the wetland. Some connotations may be demeaning and dehumanizing to some communities, may create fears about the future and may reincarnate their rights to the next generations. This article therefore demonstrates the symbolism in language used by conflicting communities in the transboundary conflict in Namatala wetland in eastern Uganda. The article examines how conflicting communities use language to describe their conflict situation and the connotations imbued in the language used. The article further illustrates how such language use can protract the conflict. The article has been divided into three sections; the first section highlights the area of study and methods used, this is followed by findings and discussion and the final section is the conclusion.

Study Area and Methods

The study was conducted in three districts of Mbale, Budaka and Butaleja sharing Namatala wetland catchment area in Eastern Uganda. The focus of the study was in the four sub-counties adjacent to Namatala wetland namely; Lyama, Kamonkoli, Bukasakya and Butaleja town council.

Namatala is a transboundary seasonal wetland that supports the livelihoods of adjacent communities. There are a number of economic activities that are undertaken on the transboundary wetland such as cultivation, grazing of animals, fishing, casual labour, collection of firewood and artisan material. The people who share the wetland belong to three districts; and belong to several ethnic groups but there are three dominant groups in the area; the Bagwere from Budaka, the Bagisu from Mbale and the Banyole from Butaleja. This area was selected purposively because it had had recurring conflicts for more than a decade. Besides that, the wetland has unique features of being transboundary and with a number of ethnic groups conflicting over the wetlands which none of the groups has legally acceptable ownership rights. Such a situation has implications on conflicting interests over user rights of the resource. The four sub-counties were also purposively selected because they are the sub-counties embroiled in perennial conflicts over the wetland.

The study adopted a qualitative approach and generated data using two methods of data collection, namely; focus group discussions and key informant interviews. The two methods of data collection were used because they allow for free expressions of people's feelings about the conflict. A total of eight (8) FGDs were conducted in the four sub-counties; four of them were for men and four were for women. This was done in order to compare the views of men and women regarding the conflict in the different sub-counties. The detail of location of the FGDs is presented in the table 1 below.

Table 1: *Number of FGDs and their locations*

District	Group No	Location	Sub.-county	Gender	No. of Participants
Mbale	1	Peri-urban	Bukasakya	Male	8
	2	Peri-urban	Bukasakya	Female	7
Budaka	1	Rural	Kamonkoli	Female	10
	2	Rural	Kamonkoli	Male	10
	3	Rural	Lyama	Male	6
	4	Rural	Lyama	Female	10
Butaleja	1	Peri-urban	Butaleja town council	Male	11
	2	Peri-urban	Butaleja town council	Female	10

The key informants on the other hand were 12 and these comprised of local leaders, 'users of the wetland' and victims of the conflict. O'Reilly and Parker (2012) argue that in qualitative research it is not numbers that matter but how rich the data is. The key informants included both males and females; 4 were women and 8 were men. All the interviews were recorded by use of a recorder with the consent from participants and the recordings were later transcribed. The study was analysed using the thematic analysis approach where codes were identified, categorized and then themes were developed (Bryman, 2012). The study ensured adherence to ethical conduct by requesting for voluntary participation of participants, asking for their consent, and by ensuring anonymity and safety of participants. The study was cleared by Makerere Research Ethics Committee and Uganda National Council of Science and Technology.

Findings and Discussion

The findings in this study illustrate that the language used by conflicting actors is not about mere words or statements but is a reflection of sociocultural realms of society. It indicates existing perceptions of what defines their identities, gender, social hierarchies and their sociocultural space. This article focuses on three aspects; perceived power differences, perceived class differences and uncertainty about the future. It further explores how these socio-cultural aspects are implied through language use and how they may produce and reproduce anger, frustrations, hopelessness and contempt which may prolong the conflict.

Perceived power differences

In this study, it emerged that conflicting communities perceive themselves to have power and strength than the opponents. We recognise that power is one of the concepts that are obscure and there are several dimensions of power, but here we focus on what Karlberg (2005) calls power as domination. This is power where one group has influence over another; and in this article it may be perceived rather than actual. In the case of Namatala, power is implied through language use. In trying to describe the conflict situation in Namatala, the participants and informants from Mbalereported that people from Kamonkoli in Budaka used statements that implied that they were more powerful than the Bagisu from Mbale. In one of the interviews, a key informant noted; *“The violence would not have occurred had it not been what the Bagwere said. They said; have you ever seen a buck(male goat) mounting a cow? Implying that we the Bagisu are goats”* (An elderly Mugisu male key informant). The symbolic phrase of ‘*can a buck mount a cow*’ has significant sociocultural connotation that relate to power differences.

Naturally, it is impossible for *a buck to mount a cow*, so the statements suggests that the Bagisu were too weak to surmount the stronger Bagwere. While the language used is aimed at showing one group as stronger, the analogy also dehumanized the weaker group. The comparison of the two animals physically represents one as big in size and another as smaller which implies that those equated to cow are stronger. The interpretation of being a goat to the Bagisu could have meant weakness, lower status and less respect, characteristics which are associated with the powerless. Putnam and Shoemaker (2007) use the concept of ‘framing’ to denote how conflicting groups define situations through labeling. Such language can be perceived to damage entire groups’ respect which produces emotions.

Besides using analogies of animals, the findings indicate that they also use language which is sexist to refer to each other. In the discussions, a participant from Budaka reported that; *“the people from Butaleja said; you Bagwere are women, you cannot win the battle. All you need is to put on skirts and gomesis (female traditional wear) so that we confirm your sex”*. Such sexist talk has sociocultural aspects that relate to socialization, gender inequalities and power dimensions in those communities. Different cultures have difference perception of what it takes to be a man or woman. While in some cultures women may be regarded as strong, in some cultures due to the socialization process, they are regarded as a weaker sex that cannot protect themselves ((Kalra & Bhugra, 2013). Thus, an entire community being regarded as women may imply that the entire community is weak.

Besides that, being regarded as women could as well mean that the community has been subdued especially in the context of Namatala where women are married by men. It means that ‘the women community’ has been subdued and taken over by the ‘men community’. Symbolism is a powerful tool of communicating. In the above statements, it is clear that conflicting communities use language to symbolize themselves as stronger and their opponents as weaker, however they do it in a demeaning manner. Such derogatory language indicates that the conflict is far from over because it breeds anger and hatred between the conflicting communities. M. J. Carter and Fuller (2015) argue that people behave depending on how they interpret their reality. Besides, in situations where language has such negative connotations, it may create the desire for one community to revenge in order to prove they are not as weak as their opponents claim.

Social class differences

When communities are in conflict, they tend to accentuate the actual or perceived inequalities within their society. Besides the expressions that symbolize power differences above, the language used by conflicting communities in Namatala also depicted social class differences. Whereas social class differences are sometimes recognized to bring social order in society, they are also widely acknowledged to create conflicts in some areas (Edlund & Lindh, 2015 ; Udoh & Ibok, 2014). In agreement with this, Kyrou and Rubinstein (2008) augment that in a conflict context, such social differences can be reflected through language use. Thus, in line with this view, the findings reveal that in the process of each group proclaiming and reaffirming their claim of ownership over the wetland, they used expressions that symbolize class differences. For example, one key informant noted;

The Bagwere have been our tenants from time immemorial, they have been paying rent on a monthly or seasonal basis; how then do they become owners of the wetland?..... They came to work for us, later they requested us to rent some land to them, now they want to claim ownership? If they want to use this wetland, let them pay busulu (rent), anything short of that, they have to leave. (an elderly Munyole key informant from Butaleja).

Another participant from another community also reported; *“the Bagisu were and are still our workers, they have never owned any piece of land across Namatala river. They used to help us weed and harvest the rice and of recent they have been involved in tankula (sorting out rice grain from rice straw)”* (an elderly male Mugwere participant from Kamonkoli). These statements show that the conflicting communities perceive themselves to be of different social classes. This kind of divisive language was also noticeable in the FGDs as people were explaining the magnitude of the conflict. The participant from Lyama said; *“the Banyole told us that they are educated and their children are educated too. They do not need to fight, they will just use their knowledge, wealth and a pen; and the land will be taken away from us”* (young male participant from Lyama). Literature posits that what defines whether one group is of a higher class in society is ownership of property, positions or prestige (Koski, Xie, & Olson, 2015). In the statements above, people from conflicting communities use language to claim that their communities are of a better class either in terms of being landlords, educated, or as employers while depicting theopponents as landless, uneducated, workers or being engaged in lower status jobs. The lower status jobs are symbolized in the economic activity referred to as ‘Tankula’. This is a job associated with people of very low status since they make a living from the residues of harvested rice. What is clear from all the statements is that there is social class differences embedded within the expressions.

Since social class is accompanied with exclusions, those who perceive themselves to be of an upper class claim control of society’s valuable resources (Koski et al., 2015), in the case of Namatala, it is the wetland. Thus being landlord, employer or educated has huge implications on who has power, wealth and prestige in society. Eijk (2012) argues that social class differences shape the interaction processes because they involve struggles for identity, power and self-respect. Thus, the use of such language has divided communities sharing the wetland into ‘landlords and tenants’ or ‘employers and laborers’. This has disintegrated their social relations between groups; creating discontent and bitterness. This incites both groups to fight with the purpose of either maintaining the higher class or rejecting the lower class attributed to them. While the intent and purpose of using that language could be to reaffirm their rights over the wetland, the divisiveness embedded in it perpetuates the conflict.

Uncertainty about the future

The wetland is central to the lives of communities in Namatala but it has different sociocultural meanings to the people who use it. Tsikata and Gola(2010) argue that, land can be perceived differently in terms of; space, a commodity, a source of livelihood, a site of belonging, a site of struggle, as well as part of the natural world. Given such different perceptions, when a land resource is contested for, there is more to fight for than the physical land (Peace, 2005). In the case of Namatala, the uncertainty about the future without a wetland is depicted in the expressions they make. In one of the focus groups discussions, a female participant noted; *“That wetland is our cooking pot. How can you leave your cooking pot? Where then will you get the food? We have to fight for our pot because that is where the relish is* (an elderly Munyole female participant from Butaleja). Another participant from Budaka also said *“To us, the wetland is our gold. We live because of that gold, our children are in school because of that gold, the money for medical care comes from that gold and even wives are obtained from that same gold. Without it, there is no life!”*(A male Mugwere participant from Lyama-Budaka). The language reflects the uncertainty men and women have on their ability to fulfill the social responsibilities in society without the critical resource. Therefore, the expressions reflect what Lake and Rothchild (1996) call collective fears of the future and in Namatala this future is that without the wetland.

In addition to the uncertainty, the statements above also illuminate the energy and determination of people to fight on. The fear and uncertainty about their future creates a spirit of readiness and determination by conflicting parties to fight. This determination was also expressed

through language. For example one key informant reported in a raised voice; “*when the blood of our children was shed over that wetland, we cannot let the Banyole use that land in the name of bringing peace*” (an elderly Mugwere woman from Budaka). Another participant said in a raised voice; “*The government will have to construct bigger prisons because it is going to take all of us. We shall be arrested and if released, we shall comeback and fight. If we don’t come back, the ones left behind will fight for our land*” (A young Munyole male participant from Butaleja). While another from a different community said; “*even if we do not live to use that land, our grandchildren will fight and use that land in future*” (An elderly Mugisumale participant from Mbale). The kind of language in the statements above depicts memories of loss of life on one hand, limited respect for government interventions on the other and contempt. Bar-Tal et al. (2014) argue that language use can reinforce memories of loss because people are able to share conflict supporting narratives. Expressions that symbolize memories of loss socially perpetuate the conflict to the next generation.

Social reincarnation is a powerful way of propagating the conflict because it is passed on through a process of socialization. This reincarnation is evident in the expressions of; ‘*the ones left behind will fight for our land*’ and ‘*our grandchildren will fight and use the land in future*’. This implies that the children and grandchildren will be told about the need to reclaim what is considered as theirs. The raised voices in the expressions also depict a lot of anger, hatred, contempt, helplessness and despair. Donohue (2012) denotes that hatred, suspicion and mistrust are critical instruments in persistent conflicts. They produce the desire to revenge in order to come out of that situation of anguish. Literature posits that one of the key ingredients of perpetuating conflicts is the act of revenge (Amegashie & Runkel, 2012). The expressions demonstrate contempt by those who have lost the land but at the same time it portrays an unrelenting spirit. The language used keeps their claim over the resource alive through the process of socialization and this is a powerful way of propagating for the conflict for generations.

Conclusion

The article illustrates how language use by conflicting communities in Namatala transboundary wetland is imbued with statements and expressions that have socio-cultural symbolic meaning. The language used depicts existing perceptions of what defines their identities, social and economic wellbeing and gender roles. The article demonstrates that the language conflicting communities use is imbued with analogies, sexist expressions, bases of stratification, and claims over the wetland. However, the statements symbolize power differences, social class differences, and it reflects the uncertainties people have without the wetland. This symbolism is repeatedly used to assert, and re-affirm their rights to the competitors, to the authorities and to reincarnate these rights to the next generations through socialization. The symbolism in language use is not only derived from words, but it is also reflected in the voice tone used as they make the statements and claims; which gives pride to some groups; yet humiliates others. Such feelings produce anger, animosity, anguish and the spirit of vengeance. Therefore in this article, we argue that, while conflicting communities in transboundary wetlands use language with the intent and purpose of asserting their rights over the contested wetland, the symbolism imbued in the language polarizes communities and the polarization perpetuates the conflict. Therefore, it is important that district administrators and government understand the attachment people have to the resource of a wetland and the symbolic expressions if they are to get meaningful and sustainable conflict management mechanisms to this conflict.

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