

Article

Religious Environmental Sensemaking in Climate-Induced Conflicts

Joram Tarusarira 

Department of Comparative Study of Religion, University of Groningen, 9712 GK Groningen, The Netherlands; j.tarusarira@rug.nl

Abstract: This article used the case of the Pokot community in northern Kenya to argue that focusing only on technical approaches in dealing with conflicts induced by climate change neglects the deeper religio-spiritual mechanisms that motivate actors in such conflicts and give the latter their texture. For example, the sacred connection with cattle, forests, and land, or the spiritual blessings of cattle raiders in times of competition over dwindling resources raise questions concerning whether and how indigenous religions' sacred beliefs and practices contribute to finding peaceful solutions to such conflicts and advancing the discourse of religious peacebuilding. This article deployed the concept of religious environmental sense-making to argue that framing climate-induced conflicts in sacred terms influences how actors position themselves within them, as well as their level of intensity and intractability. Answering this question is crucial to advancing the field of peacebuilding, understanding what propels actors in climate-induced conflicts, and comprehending how policy-makers and mediators in conflicts can develop locally grounded strategies to address such climate issues.

Keywords: climate-induced conflict; religious peacebuilding; indigenous religions; traditional knowledge system; religious environmental sensemaking



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1. Introduction

Climate change has become a threat multiplier of fragility, conflict, displacement, and irregular migration, undermining international peace and security. It has contributed to bloody inter-communal violence in communities that fully depend for their survival on environmental resources, which they consider sacred, as in many parts of Africa (Scheffran et al. 2014; Van Baalen and Mobjörk 2018). Diviners bless cattle-raiders, and people take extraordinary measures, such as engaging in bloody conflicts and even sacrificing their lives, to protect what they consider sacred, such as land, water, and cattle. Currently, scholars in natural sciences, economics, development studies, and politics and policy-makers interpret these conflicts in economic, humanitarian, or military terms and marginalize the mobilization of religion and spirituality. These responses and approaches prioritize positivist epistemologies and methods of statistical, correlational, scientific, legal, or economic reasoning, which, while insightful, explain neither the causal relations between climate change and conflicts nor the cultural underpinnings that drive the latter. This article builds on these studies to investigate how sacred beliefs and practices can account for some of the motivations of the actors involved in climate change-induced conflicts. Doing so takes the discourse of religious peacebuilding and peacebuilding further by complementing liberal and secular approaches (see Alusala et al. 2019). Non-positivist and non-statistical factors such as religion and spirituality are often ignored, muted, and misunderstood (Farrell 2015, p. 3). This is because, first, the study of morality has been neglected in environmental sociology and other disciplines; second, nature has been operationalized as a resource and a material good for survival; third, religion and spirituality have been treated as confined to the individual; and fourth, there has been an assumption that post-Enlightenment forces of secularization have been stamping out religion and

spirituality (Farrell 2015). However, to make sense of climate-induced conflicts, the actors draw their inspiration from religious and spiritual-moral orders. As a result, they may resort to extraordinary measures, such as engaging in bloody, inter-generational conflicts and even sacrificing their lives to protect what they consider sacred, for instance, land, water, and cattle (Maringira 2019; Sachdeva 2016). Sacred beliefs and practices thus play a crucial role in shaping how actors position themselves and deal with conflicts.

To be clear, to refer to climate change as a threat multiplier means that the relationship between climate change and conflict should not be taken as necessary. It is indirect. There is no causal relationship between climate change and conflict, but climate change contributes to conflict combined with socio-economic and political factors. This article acknowledges that scarcity of natural resources and other factors, such as government policies around water supplies and so on, can impinge upon these conflicts hence the conflicts would not necessarily be a result of climate change, per se. However, the argument is that the negative impacts of climate change contribute to resource scarcity, and governments are sometimes forced to make certain policies around natural resources they would not have made had the climate not been changing and negatively affecting the availability of the resources. The article does not claim that the conflicts in question result from climate change, but that climate change contributes to or increases the risk of conflict (see Burke et al. 2015; Hsiang et al. 2011) due to its negative impact on the environment. Hence, the interchangeable use of ‘climate change’ and ‘climate-related environmental change’ in climate and environmental security studies. Indicative studies that have argued for the connection between climate change and conflict in East Africa include the following. O’Loughlin et al. (2012) argued that much warmer-than-normal temperatures increase the risk of violence compared with average and cooler temperatures, which have no effect. Van Baalen and Mobjörk (2018) observed that the negative impact of climate-related environmental change on the availability of natural resources can lead to conflict by worsening livelihood conditions, increasing migration, or changing pastoral mobility patterns. Using the parameter of rainfall variability to explore the marginal influence of the climate on conflict, Raleigh and Kniveton (2012) concluded that in areas that experience communal conflict events, the frequency of these events increased in periods of extreme rainfall variation. Ember et al. (2012) found that it is not only resource scarcity that leads to conflict and violence. Violence related to livestock was higher in wetter months and wetter years, contrary to the assumption that lack of water and pasture is the main driver of livestock violence. Emerging from this research field is that climate-related environmental change contributes to and is indirectly connected to conflict and violence.

Drawing on interviews with Pokot community elders, the custodians of Pokot indigenous religion, in northern Kenya, this article, therefore, argues that factoring in knowledge about religion and spirituality sheds a critical theoretical light on the context, texture, and structure of climate-induced conflicts and the parties’ motivations and positioning, thus revealing what underlies the conflict, increasing our comprehension of the conflicts and identifying opportunities. It thus illuminates our understanding of how actors make sense of climate-related conflicts and how that can further our understanding of the intersection of religion, conflict, and peacebuilding. It does so by developing the concept of religious environmental sensemaking to examine how human actors make sense of their worlds to bridge existential or fundamental gaps using religious and spiritual interpretations.

2. Religion, Sensemaking, and Climate-Induced Conflicts

This article understands conflict as a ‘social process by which two or more individuals or groups struggle to control meanings, power and resources’ (Farrell 2015). This conflict is not restricted to the pursuit of economic interests but includes norms, meanings, beliefs, and cultural values or beliefs and feelings about the sacredness of nature (Farrell 2015, pp. 97–98). Climate change can stimulate conflict in two ways: first, through changes in the political economy of energy resources due to mitigative action to reduce emissions from fossil fuels and, second, through changes in social systems driven by actual

or perceived climate impacts (Rifkin 2002). The article is concerned with the second of these possible connections. It seeks to offer new insights into the relationships between climate change and violent conflict by integrating religio-cultural influences that structure life. The article conceptualizes religion and spirituality as they are lived, including paying attention to rituals, stories, and spiritual experiences that may draw on 'official' religious traditions but that may also extend beyond them (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008). The article does not treat religion and spirituality as inherently violent or peaceful but as phenomena that stakeholders mobilize for specific ends. The article engages with both as discourses with significant power effects. They structure social actors' perceptions and interpretations of reality and the actions or practices that emerge from these interpretations (Keller 2011). The present article sees them as influencing beliefs, attitudes, and actions regarding conflicts in which the negative effects of climate change are variables. It is interested in the religious and spiritual frameworks in which the Pokot of northern Kenya are embedded, and their beliefs and desires are shaped. Furthermore, it argues that understanding religion and spirituality is imperative because they help believers make sense of their situations, thus forming the presuppositional and determinative starting points for action (see Farrell 2015).

Sensemaking is a metatheory, methodology, and method for discovering why people think epistemically and act practically the way they do and how they make sense of their lives. The objective of sensemaking is defined 'as behaviour, both internal and external, which allows the individual to construct and design movement through time-space' (Dervin 1983, p. 3). In the context of climate-induced conflicts, in which religion and spirituality are variables, both phenomena determine how parties to the conflict think about and act on the natural environment affected by climate change by drawing on religious resources and sensibilities. The article thus understands religious thought and practice as sensemaking, which shapes specific situations' cognitive, emotional, and moral imperatives (Campbell 2010). Religious sensemaking, that is, informs 'believers' about the innermost sense of who they are, why they and the world exist, and how they believe they should act (Farrell 2015, p. 10). The central sensemaking activities seek, process, create, and use the information needed to define one's life-world. Sensemaking is, first and foremost, a social practice, the product of a particular social process. Secondly it also includes a host of other subjective factors that reflect the individual's interpretation of a situation, including intuitions, opinions, hunches, effective responses, evaluations and questions (Dervin 1983).

Research has shown that religious beliefs, emotions, practices, and experiences may help adherents' sensemaking when dealing with fundamental existential issues such as death, suffering, and injustice (Oman 2013). Religious values shape identities and give purpose to people's lives (Sachdeva 2016). Psychologists have demonstrated how religion can shape one's perception of the world and form the most foundational aspects of identity, including attitudes, beliefs, and preferences (Sachdeva 2016; Emmons and Paloutzian 2003). Place attachment theory articulates 'a deeply emotional, and sometimes spiritual, bond with particular landscapes that form over time, within larger narratives, and [that] shapes one's sense of self, community, and connectedness with the natural world. It can, thus, explain why competition might arise over a place to which a people have a sacred attachment. Such attachments cannot "be quantified into dollars and cents" (Farrell 2015, p. 219; Counted 2016). Place attachment creates 'within people a feeling of moral responsibility, leading them to draw moral boundaries and protect areas to which they are meaningfully connected' (Counted 2016). The mobilization hypothesis argues that escalation to violent conflict becomes likelier once certain religious and spiritual structures become politicized (Basedau et al. 2011). Religion and spirituality can interpret conflict in zero-sum terms and demonize opponents by treating them as morally inferior and dangerous, and thus suitable to be dealt with harshly (Pape 2005).

3. Methodology

The article used the case of the Pokot community because the Pokot are strongly attached to their indigenous religion, spirituality, and traditional knowledge system, despite

infiltrations by Christianity. It utilized data gathered from structured interviews and a focus-group discussion with ten elders of the Pokot community in northern Kenya in 2021. A Swahili-speaking researcher conducted the interviews in Kiswahili and recorded and transcribed them. The interviewer used snowball sampling to recruit the interview partners. The interviewers who come from the research site approached the elders they knew, who then referred them to the other elders. The elders were chosen because they are the custodians of indigenous religion, spirituality, and the traditional knowledge system, which undergirds how the community makes sense of life. The interviews revolved around climate change, environmental change, conflict, and sacred beliefs and practices. We used pre-set and emergent codes to analyze the data. The article does not seek to romanticize, reify, and instrumentalize culture by emphasizing the determining causal effects of culture and value or suggesting that cultural norms, values, or ideas produce climate-induced conflict. It is alive to the heterogeneity and local variability of attitudes and beliefs and that traditions are constantly transformed and reinvented. It also does not suggest that people are imbued with the precepts of their sacred beliefs and practices, thus bound by sacred beliefs about natural resources. Instead, it emphasizes the inescapable moral makeup of the Pokot. The conclusions made are, however, based on the interviews conducted. The interview schedules focused on how the Pokot understand nature and their natural environment, with a particular interest in the role of religion and spirituality and how they influence their positioning in conflicts induced by climate change. The Pokot are just one case, but the conclusions drawn from this case study can provide insights beyond this specific case. Similar cases exist in Africa and beyond, where religious environmental sensemaking can help comprehend the conflicts. Cases in point include the U'Wa indigenous community in Colombia, which resisted the state's intention to drill for oil on their ancestral land (Arenas 2007); the conflict between the Aborigines in Australia and the Federal government over uranium mining Kakadu National Park, with the Aborigines arguing that the shaft reached a sacred site (Aplin 2004; Pockley 1999); and the conflict that erupted in 2021 between the government of Zimbabwe and the people of Chilonga over the expropriation of their ancestral for the production of lucerne grass (Tarusarira 2021).

4. Religious Environmental Sensemaking among the Pokot

The community is being greatly affected by climate change and climate-induced conflicts. It fights to preserve its natural environment from both rapid and frequent climate change and from being taken over by other communities, such as the Samburu, the Turkana, or the Maasai, in struggles over dwindling resources. Contemporary raids have become more frequent and fatal due to increased extreme climatic events, particularly droughts (Huho 2019). West Pokot County is semi-arid to arid and characterized by water scarcities and pasturage, with worsening conditions as drought frequency and severity increase (Huho 2019). As the county becomes drier, competition for water and pasturage and livestock replacement lost during droughts increases (Huho 2019). West Pokot County is inhabited primarily by the Pokot and has a population of 512,690, with 56 persons per square kilometer. About 60% of the population live in the lowlands and practice nomadic pastoralism, while the rest are agro-pastoralists living in the highlands (Huho 2019). In the rangelands of northwest Kenya, conflicts over resource use are common around key natural resources such as water, pasturage, and land for settlement, mainly due to dwindling water and pasturage resources. These conflicts tend to be seasonal and increase during the dry season, showing how they are dependent on climatic conditions. They pit communities such as the Pokot, Samburu, Turkana, and Maasai against each other and often result in loss of life and property. As the effects of climatic variation and climate change grow, natural resource conflicts are also expected to increase in the rangelands in the future.

The Pokot, as we shall see shortly, value their indigenous religion and traditional knowledge system, which they connect to the natural environment. They believe in the power of indigenous religion and their traditional knowledge system to prevent, manage, and respond to the challenges of climate change. It is vital to first delve deeper into

the sacred beliefs and practices of the Pokot to understand how they influence making sense of climate change and related conflicts. One elder demonstrated how the Pokot take indigenous religion and their traditional knowledge system seriously as early warning systems, saying:

You know this Turkwel river, let me tell you . . . in those days a bird sang that there would be a time it would flood. It was foretold. And the bird sang. I sit with elders, and I know all those things. The intelligent were supposed to migrate from the valley and settle on the hills. So that should floods happen one day, only trees and wild animals will be destroyed. Now is the time to listen to those issues.

Another added:

Before the catastrophe of the landslide that happened, old men had foreseen. They warned people, telling them something would happen, do this and that as a way of forestalling danger. In Turkwel, it was also foretold that the dam would spill over one day and that people needed to live on the hills. This was said even before the rains started. Now people began regretting, saying 'so it (the landslide) has happened the way elders foretold'.

The elders believe in warnings from the bird. This can arguably be based on the understanding that nature animals, including birds, are part of one's kith and kin in indigenous religion and traditional knowledge systems. Concepts of personhood and kinship extend to non-human entities like the natural environment and animals (Cruikshank 2005). As the bird thus cares for its kith and kin, it warns them against impending danger. Here we encounter two early warning systems or knowledge systems: the modernist system that prefers technical geological and climatological instruments to predict catastrophes such as landslides; and religio-cultural and traditional knowledge systems in which the appearance of a bird at a certain time is enough to predict catastrophes. The former's understanding of nature and humans is Cartesian, the two being hermetically distinct from one another. The elders lament how modern scientific explorers have convinced some community members to ignore their counsel, resulting in catastrophes. They also regret how other religious traditions such as Christianity have dislodged their indigenous beliefs and knowledge systems and taken their youth away with them. One elder said:

These modern religions have come to condemn traditional forms of religion. Surprisingly, people have turned to modern forms of religion, forgetting their traditional religion. There is a reason for every prohibition. Thus, this generation is trying to undermine traditional knowledge, saying we have gone to church.

The concern of the elders seems to show that these prohibitions have their reasons, which could be that there is a sort of knowledge that is being lost because Christianity has condemned it. People use their affiliation with Christianity to get out of their obligations, thereby destroying the knowledge embedded in the traditional system protected by its prohibitions. Indigenous religion and traditional knowledge systems form the cultural archive from which the Pokot critically, hermeneutically, and discursively draw resources to make sense of various issues that affect their lives, including dealing with the challenges of climate change. The transmission of this archive and its usefulness for making sense and dealing with climate challenges is threatened because of the dislodging effect of religious competitors like Christianity. This affects the 'religious' aspect of that knowledge and all the rest of it because it undermines the plausibility of the whole traditional world view in which climate knowledge and ways to address climate challenges are embedded. However, it should be noted that indigenous religion and traditional knowledge systems are not to be perceived as encapsulated in closed traditions, produced during human encounters rather than discovered. They are dynamic and complex and link biophysical and social processes (Cruikshank 2005, p. 5). The elders asserted a connection between their indigenous religion, spirituality, and traditional knowledge system and how they respond to conflicts of any nature. Regarding conflicts over the cutting down of sacred trees, one elder said:

Whenever anyone sees someone cutting down a sacred tree, they will raise the alarm. There and then, people will come quickly because the tree belongs to the community. If damage arises from such an act, such damage is shared. So, people prevent it by responding quickly.

In the same vein, another elder said:

Now we have sacred places where no one is allowed to encroach; old men forbid anyone from entering such places. And if 'you' enter such places, you will be in trouble. Imagine there is a large tree at Bendera. It is sacred. No one is allowed to touch that tree.

These assertions dovetail with the belief that infractions are met with punishment and sanctions. The neglect of indigenous religion, spirituality and the traditional knowledge system is thus met with punishment from the 'gods' for not following their counsel, which is transmitted through the community elders. The 'gods' make moral judgements and punish transgressions (Cruikshank 2005). The fact that the alarm is raised when sacred trees are cut down suggests that the conflict has become cosmic. Emerging from this is also the understanding that punishment for transgressing prohibitions may not fall only on the transgressor but also on all those who have the collective responsibility to ensure that the boundaries protecting the sacred are not trespassed upon. The functional dimensions of indigenous religions is also brought to the fore when the community is mobilized and united to protect its sacred trees. The community and the sacredness of the trees are entangled. Not protecting sacred forests is perceived as having dire consequences. Hence, communities do everything in their power, including engaging in bloody conflicts, to protect them.

Mythical stories are told, such as one about a tree that throws off those who intrude on it and whose fruits kill those who eat them. One elder said:

Imagine a place called Parua secondary school. At this place, there is a tree that no one is allowed to cut. If you eat its fruits, you die. Old men know this. Do not ignore what elders say. Something will throw you from there; that is when you will know it is sacred.

Stories such as this function to bolster, produce, and reproduce traditional beliefs, make sense of the natural environment, and manage and preserve it. Furthermore, collisions between different approaches towards this environment are addressed in this way. One elder said:

It is like the case at Parua. There is a place called Kailat prohibited by elders. A European missionary went to extract water from there. Old men told him, 'Do not draw water from here. Go upstream'. Kailat is the house of God. He photographed and cut trees as he entered the valley. Up to now, the gulf that is there is very deep and wide. No one can enter the valley. So what the elders have prohibited should not be encroached upon. Those who insist will be struck or die to serve as an example to others.

Certain conclusions can be drawn from this example. Firstly, what implicitly emerges from what the elder stated resonates with our discussion earlier about the consequences of entering sacred places such as Kailat. It is not immediately clear what exactly transpired at Kailat, but what we can distil from the account is that, as a result of trespassing over the boundaries and transgressing the rules and norms of behavior regarding a sacred space, the gods must have been angered and a "deep gulf", such as the ground caving in or a similar disaster, opened up at this place. What is also clear from the message is that deviation from acceptable behavior is punished. As we have seen already, the punishment goes to the transgressor but might also go to the guardians of the sacred space. No one, not even they, can enter the valley lest they incur divine wrath. As guardians, moreover, they will confront transgressors, resulting in conflict.

Secondly, the story of the European missionary reveals the differences in approaches to beliefs and knowledge systems. The missionary represents a modernist knowledge system that does not treat nature as conscious, sentient, and enchanted but treats local beliefs as superstition. The missionary referred to by the elder embodies generations motivated by concepts of science that provided modernity's motor and took for granted the universality of these concepts as organizing principles for knowledge. While a 'science'-driven knowledge system is mono-directional, the Pokot's principles governing knowledge are based on reciprocity: 'among humans, with non-human animals, and with a responsive landscape' (see Cruikshank 2005, p. 18). The Pokot do not conceptualize climate change as such but describe the changes they observe in weather patterns, for instance, long dry seasons and extreme weather patterns, which directly impact the natural environment. The environment is the epistemological meeting point between the 'Western' and Pokot conceptualizations of the climate-conflict nexus discourse, but behind the environmental change is climate change.

Thirdly, the fact that the European agent is specified as a missionary also indicates that this science-driven knowledge is also used to demonstrate the power of a different (religious) world view as opposed to the ineffectiveness, if not the wrongness, of local 'superstitious' religions. Here, this narrative is turned on its head by the elder telling the story, which demonstrates the opposite: the triumph and effectiveness of local knowledge and god(s) over foreign and competing religious forces, since the gulf that has opened up in the ground, is now very deep and wide, with no one able to enter it.

Whether the story told by the elder regarding the missionary might be considered a myth or not is neither here nor there. Myths form part of indigenous religion and traditional knowledge systems. They are used not because they are true or false but because they are effective and help the Pokot make sense of their environment. Dismissing these narratives and beliefs because they are true or false or cannot be falsified, or because their veracity cannot be established leads to what underlies some of these conflicts being missed. These conflicts are not based on truth or falsity but are moral questions based on what is perceived as right or wrong for the community. These narratives and oral traditions, too often evaluated as data or evidence, should be treated as knowledge or theory that might contribute different perspectives to academia. The communities' deployment of myths becomes a strategic option for sanctioning the irresponsible cutting down of sacred trees or mobilizing certain actions against the violators.

The elders were quick to qualify that they are not necessarily mean, evil, or hell-bent on punishing violations. They can tell who is culpably and inculpably ignorant, and the inculpably ignorant are not punished. One elder said:

There is something I know you don't know. If you commit a mistake unknowingly to the elders, you are innocent. And if you do so knowingly, action will be taken against you. But if you are innocent, here is how elders cleanse you, for you do not know. You just found yourself in it. But if you do it intentionally, culture will follow you because you will have offended the elders. Listen to the warning of the elders.

This assertion shows the Janus face of the elders and the spiritual realm they represent. While they punish, they also forgive and leave room for people to make mistakes as long as they are not deliberate. The elders present themselves as not fault-finders but as focused on maintaining a society of care and justice in the entangled world of human and non-human beings. That the elders will cleanse an inculpable transgressor demonstrates their legitimacy as embodiments of the just spiritual world. Furthermore, while they are instruments of culture, culture has its agency; hence it can follow (punish) those who intentionally disregard the counsel of the elders who represent it. Thus, here culture means the agentic spiritual realm.

The elders asserted that they sometimes conflict with the government when treating and managing the natural environment. This is yet another case of cultural or knowledge-system encounters between two orders or ways of making sense of the natural environment

in times of climate crisis. When asked if it is the government that wants to cut down the trees, the elders responded:

The government cannot force. You know the government comes from the citizens. And the government comes from the elders. Where does the government come from? So, the government knows they have said no when the elders say no. If it is the chief, he knows. Again, he is an elder who has children; he cannot say 'Do these things' unless the elders themselves do it. Every office of the chief has got elders; there are headmen. We don't have offices that are without elders. You cannot do anything alone without elders.

The elders suggest that the government derives its legitimacy from them (who act in place of the community). They are the government. They are responsible for safeguarding nature from all violators, including the government, because they are responsible for protecting it for future generations, to whom they feel accountable. They uphold their political and traditional structures, which are entrusted with determining the natural environment's cognitive, emotional, and moral orders. The office of the chief and the elders here points to the importance of traditional structures in dealing with conflicts locally, rather than referring cases to the state courts. The background to the elder's response is that, due to dwindling resources induced by climate change, the government ends up encroaching on the natural resources of traditional communities, some of which are considered sacred. The government treats the natural environment as a mere factor in production, a resource to exploit, an unenchanted material good for human survival, subject to empirical investigation and measurement, an instrument for human use (resourcism) and a set of quantifiable, physico-chemical phenomena (reductionism) (van Koppen 2000). This thus suggests that dealing with the challenges of climate change requires building on and taking modernist approaches to conflict management that merely allow a physico-chemical understanding of the natural environment further.

Turning to animals, the elders spoke to cultural beliefs such as attachment to cattle, heroism, dowry payments, and initiation rites, which manifest themselves in the form of cattle-rustling, ethnic killings and murder, and land conflicts (Chebunet et al. 2013). These values are underpinned by indigenous religion and traditional knowledge systems. Due to herds dwindling as climate change increases and conflicts such as cattle-rustling intensify, the elders asserted that their spirituality instructs them on how to make sense of the conflicts. This often results in them using all means necessary. One elder said:

If I have my cows and the effects of climate change like drought claim them, I must find all possible ways to protect them. In Pokot culture, cows are actually for the community. They may be yours, but they are for the community. And from time to time, you slaughter a bull because you live in a kraal. So, you slaughter a bull as a sign of togetherness. Even if an enemy comes, we will fight together. We will be killed; all of us will die, but we know we will be fighting to protect the common herd because we feel that common ownership. Nowadays, it is said it is better to die in the footsteps of animals than dying a mere death or being killed because you steal some things in the supermarket. If you die in the footsteps of the animals, that is a good death. Because you are protecting the livelihood of the community. That is ownership. It is taken as a community. That means that, apart from the belief that animals are at the center, you also believe that animals are a source of livelihood, and it also defines your political position in society and so on.

The preceding quote confirms the strong connection between the Pokot and their cows. The 'sacred cows' function as sites where numerous aspects of sacredness such as heroism, kinship, community, rites and rituals, and identity are entangled. The sacred quality they claim is a force multiplier: as it moderates the relationship between climate change and conflict, it can make conflict induced by climate change intense, passionate, and intractable, because the cattle owners do everything to protect them. This is indicated by the assertion

that it is better to die in the footsteps of animals than to die a mere death or being caught stealing in a supermarket. Death while protecting animals is described morally as a good death. This harks back to the understanding that conflicts induced by climate change in which religion and spirituality are variables become moral conflicts: they are prompted by local conceptions of right and wrong, what is valued and for what reason. The elder's response also foregrounds the sacredness of the community, to which one must affirm one's belonging, for example, by slaughtering a bull. The community is a reservoir of cognitive, moral, and emotional meaning regarding all the different aspects of life. Therefore, the bulls that are slaughtered to affirm togetherness and belonging must be protected by all means. While the importance of animals for livelihoods and one's standing in society is acknowledged, a conflict in which the protection of the bulls is central is sparked by their religious and spiritual rather than economic definition, the latter being subsumed in the former. While stealing from a supermarket might also be a way to secure one's livelihood—which unfortunately can lead to one's death from mob justice, which tends to happen in communities such as the Pokot—it is better to die protecting 'sacred' cattle than answering existential needs like food to survive through stealing from a supermarket. The Pokot treat some pieces of land and animals, such as the cow, as sacred. This characterization shapes and moderates how the community responds to conflicts over the natural environment, including their animals.

From our interviews, we can conclude that the Pokot have an indigenous religion and a traditional knowledge system, which they use to make sense of their natural environment, including their trees and animals. Hence, scholars and practitioners need to consider the types of sacred resources that come under pressure through climate-induced conflicts: competing orders of knowledge, retribution, myths, the role of the community, etc.

The connection between the idea of the sacred, climate change, and conflict engenders the need to investigate how religion and spirituality shape the already visible situations and processes, as we have seen in the context of the Pokot. Economic poverty may drive these conflicts, but researchers and policy-makers cannot ignore the role of sacred beliefs and practices in making sense of them. Religious environmental sensemaking guides the Pokot's positions and positionings in conflicts. Their struggles over their forests and cattle are motivated and made more meaningful, intense, and intractable by religious environmental sensemaking.

No wonder Arturo Escobar calls conflicts over natural resources 'cultural distribution conflicts' (Escobar 2006). Climate change takes us well beyond the physical transformations (Hulme 2018). It is not only a scientific problem but also a human, political, and religious one. In step with the theory of sensemaking described above, as a religious problem, climate change challenges create (dis)continuity, gaps, confusion, and (un)certainities, as the Pokot's sacred natural environments face degradation, resulting in competition over them. Religious sensemaking presents cosmologies or life-world views that contain the most fundamental assumptions about the world and humanity's place in the cosmos (Haluzi-Delay 2018). It is thus vital to have fluency with religious imagination and sensemaking to understand the way people interact and all the relations involved in climate change (Hulme 2018). For communities like the Pokot, the belief that their trees and cattle are sacred makes conflict over them cosmic (see Juergensmeyer 2000). As a Pokot elder confirmed, when the conflict involves indigenous beliefs and practices about their trees or cattle, they do everything in their power to defend them, including sacrificing their lives. Thus, the perceived sacredness of trees or cattle becomes a force multiplier (see Hassner 2009). However, those with no familiarity with the concept of the sacredness imbued in the animals may dismiss their passionate ties (Podziba 2018).

The sacred or spiritual relationship between the Pokot and their trees and cattle forms what this article calls religious environmental sensemaking, which mediates how they make sense of their positions and positionings in conflicts over trees and cattle. The spiritual and cultural importance of the environment can lead to competition, as religious groups seek to exclude their rivals from practicing potentially sacrilegious rituals in the sacred space

(Hassner 2009). This resonates with what one elder said, namely that the Pokot perceive the felling of sacred trees and the rustling of their cattle as sacrilegious. Sacred trees and cattle thus create the potential for military, theological, or political clashes, both between competing religious groups and between religious groups and secular actors. This article takes an agent-based approach that understands community sensemaking in both thought and action as an outcome of a group of actors following common decisions and behavioral rules, both of which, in this context, emanate from religion and spirituality. Since sacred beliefs and practices influence the attitudes and behavior of actors, incorporating them into our analysis contributes to advancing the discourse of religious peacebuilding by theorizing about climate-induced conflicts and the development of scientifically grounded guidelines for environmental peacebuilding.

5. Religious Climate and Environmental Peacebuilding

Environmental peacebuilding refers to the integration of natural resource management into conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery to build resilience in the communities affected by the conflict (Environmental Peacebuilding Association 2017). It represents a broad set of practices, including the management of natural resources, providing sustainable livelihoods, mediating environment-related disputes, and building trust and understanding through intergroup cooperation over shared environmental issues (Dresse et al. 2016). Current environmental peacebuilding responds to climate-related conflicts through the inclusive and equal distribution of resources and by examining how communities can manage common and pooled natural resources in an ecologically and socially sustainable way. It assumes that environmental problems provide opportunities for cooperation and mutual benefits. Disaster diplomacy has stimulated scholars' interest in disaster-related activities that induce cooperation between enemy countries or groups (see Ide 2016). While these approaches are essential and useful, they represent the grafting of natural resource management onto existing conflict prevention, mitigation, and resolution approaches that lend themselves to secular, positivist and neoliberal sensemaking. They do not consider the role of social discourses but rather draw on the dominant realpolitik literature and approaches to conflict resolution.

Concerning the pooling of resources, the Pokot perceive cattle as communal and, therefore, as one elder indicated, as pooled. The problem is not the pooling but who is pooling with whom. The pooling is not arbitrary but is linked to the identity and boundaries of the group. This is where the trouble may arise when resource pooling is resorted to in order to tackle climate-induced problems. This may lead to conflict if pooling strategies only take scientific considerations into account and ignore the socio-religious question, which such pooling of resources may imply if the resource in question represents the very community in question, like cattle in the case of the Pokot.

Religious and spiritual sensemaking about places, environments, humans, and other animals thus can facilitate peacebuilding in contexts of climate-induced conflicts. Conflicts involving religion and the spirituality of sacred ideas cannot be resolved through a partition, sharing or side payments, as in normal disputes (Hassner 2009, pp. 38–43). Negotiations that deal with sacred land, forests, and cattle, as in the case of the Pokot, deal with phenomena that are indivisible, irreplaceable, inviolable, and incapable of being monetized, thus making the usual trade-off strategies unworkable. The value the Pokot place on their forests and cattle cannot be monetized. Their cattle are valued differently, being located in their spiritual function and significance to the community. In the eyes of the Pokot, the trees, forests, and cattle cannot be divided or shared without reducing their value. This means that the Pokot will not accept a side payment in return for relinquishing their forests or cattle. Indivisible disputes are characterized by the fact that at least one of the parties in these disputes views the resource in question as inseparable in and of itself, meaning that it cannot be taken apart. The Pokot do not want their forest and cattle to be violated or parceled out. Second, those in the conflict must consider the resource as inseparable from themselves, signifying that they will not tolerate parting with it. As one elder indicated

earlier, the Pokot will not accept parting with their forests and cattle, saying they would use all means at their disposal to protect the latter. Their cattle and forests represent their spiritual cosmos, thus revealing the sacred order of the entire universe. Violating forests or allowing competitors to raid their cattle undermines the symbolic coherence of both because they are sites where they can expect to experience the divine in the form of gods or ancestors.

In times of environmental conflict, liberal and secular interveners usually follow a long line of formal scientific procedures, deciding first whether a given ‘problem’ is a problem, and examining potential causes, solutions, alternative solutions, long-term ecological effects, how to balance the economic impacts, and how to push solutions through institutional channels strategically (e.g., through litigation or legislation). Later, they ask whether such solutions have worked and assess how to improve them in the future. An analysis of the socio-religious impact of their measures is not considered. However, the measures have effects of this nature, bouncing back at the assessors as ‘inexplicable’ side-effects. Unfortunately, these questions and approaches can only explain the ‘how’, not the ‘why’ of conflicts. Other stakeholders describe the conflicts only as a clash between experts and an ignorant, illiterate, or ill-informed public; or as the lack of sufficient ecological and biological knowledge; or as the need to simply reshape individual stakeholders’ “attitudes”; or they turn to social movement explanations relating to resource mobilization; or to an innate struggle over political power; or more simply, to economic self-interest’ (Farrell 2015, pp. 1–2). However, from this study’s perspective, it seems that it is the scientific and technical stakeholders who are ignorant, illiterate, or ill-informed about the sacred dimensions of the envisaged measures.

Consequently, environmental and climate conflicts persist (Farrell 2015). The answer might thus not only in technical knowledge, reports, and research, which, while important, are in the service of larger goals of meaning (Farrell 2015, p. 214) but also in knowledge about religious sensemaking, thus pointing to the potential of a confluence or layering of warning systems. Another possibility is to see if there is room to negotiate a median point between scientific and technical stakeholders and the popular interpretations of reality.

In figuring out how communities make sense of the challenges of conflict, the non-elitist religio-cultural approach to dealing with climate-induced conflicts resonates with the ‘vernacular’ and ‘everyday’ turns in critical security studies. These turns have sought to explore what it might mean to begin studying threat and (in)security from the perspective of popular or ‘vernacular’ constructions. In the case of the Pokot, the vernacular construction of the conflict over their forests or cattle is spiritual, not secular or liberal. This religious environmental sensemaking thus represents a vernacular approach that taps into people’s lived religious experiences. Entailed in the idea of vernacular security and peacebuilding is a proposal to treat ‘security’ and peacebuilding as socially situated and discursively defined practices. Vernacular security and peacebuilding entail a bottom-up and actor-oriented analysis in which security is conceptualized and politically practiced differently in different places and at different times. It thus unsettles top-down approaches. Security and peacebuilding are not unchanging or universally homogenous concepts (Bubandt 2005) but focus on how particular individuals and groups articulate their attitudes and understandings—that is, how they make sense of conflict and violence. Parallel to the vernacular, the ‘everyday’ turn in the humanities and social sciences finds common ground in giving greater importance to the quotidian, to the ‘spaces, rhythms, objects, and practices’ around us (Sheringham 2006, p. 2). Critical studies have embraced these approaches to develop international political sociology beyond the focus on elites (Vaughan-Williams 2016).

6. Conclusions

This article showed that dealing with climate-induced conflicts requires factoring in knowledge about sacred beliefs and practices of the stakeholders to complement positivist and technological approaches. This is helpful to account for the why or the texture of conflicts, nor the levels of intensity and intractability. At the center of climate-linked

conflicts are natural resources that are not just organic matter with mechanical-like properties. As the interviews with the Pokot community showed, they are agentic phenomena with indivisible, irreplaceable, and inviolable characteristics. These characteristics have their provenance in the claimed sacred quality of natural resources. How they influence sensemaking not only of the natural environment but also of conflicts over it, is what this article calls religious environmental sensemaking. Traditional environmental peacebuilding relies on approaches such as mediation and negotiation, whose centers are notions of partitioning, sharing or side payments, without paying due consideration to the influence of religious environmental sensemaking, which enriches and advances reflections on religiously articulated conflicts and the discourse of religious peacebuilding.

Consequently, focusing only on the material and technical aspects might leave questions about why actors take the positions they take in climate-related conflicts unanswered. Theorizing, understanding, and dealing with the relationship between climate change and conflicts thus requires factoring in religious environmental sensemaking. Climate-induced conflicts in contexts where the communities involved have a religious and spiritual relationship with the natural environment, like the Pokot, are ultimately more than about the natural resources in question. They are about boundaries, identity, and the order of the cosmos. Natural resources represent particular divinities and ontological understanding, underpinning how the Pokot responds to threats to the resources (Straight 2008). Hence, integrating non-anthropocentric ontologies contributes to alternative points of view in conceptualizing and dealing with climate conflicts and advancing the discourse of religious peacebuilding.

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