

Luyia the third largest ethnic community in kenya history essay



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The Luyia (Abaluyia), who number approximately 5 million people, are the third largest ethnic community in Kenya. Their numerical strength has partly allowed them to play an influential role in Kenya's political, economic, and cultural development. They belong to the Niger-Congo Bantu-speaking linguistic group. They are mainly found in western Kenya north of Lake Victoria where they form the largest concentration in Western Province. Some, however, live across the border in neighboring Uganda while a few can be found in northern Tanzania. Most likely, the name Luyia could have derived from the term Oluyia, a fireside by which household members convened in the evenings for sessions on the history and customs of clan lineages.

A distinctive feature of the Luyia is the numerous sub-ethnic groups that constitute the community, each speaking different but related dialects. The groups are Abalogoli, Abanyala, Abanyore, Abatachoni, Abedakho, Abesukha, Abashisa, Abamarama, Ababukusu, Abasamia, Abawanga, Abatirichi, Abakabaras, Abamarachi, Abakhayo, and Abasonga. The Luyia of Uganda mainly belongs to the Abasamia, while those of Tanzania constitute an Abalogoli Diaspora. The Luyia are the third largest populous community in Kenya, numbering about 4 million people. The region they occupy lends itself as one of the most densely populated in Kenya. The ratio between land and population density, for example, is highest in districts occupied by the Abalogoli, Abanyole, and Abatirichi.

The existence of different dialects attests not to an absolute diversity of the Abaluyia, but rather, to the clan lineages from which they descended. The heads and founders of their respective clans can be traced to a common

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ancestor. Subsequently, all these sub-groups have a shared history, as well as cultural traits as illustrated in their traditional religion, rites of passage such as circumcision. The evolution of these and other aspects of the community's culture may have taken place in the course of their long history of migration and settlement in their present homeland.

Most migration accounts in Luyia traditions indicate that the ancestors of the various sub-groups originated from Misri (probably Egypt). Gideon S. Were, a leading historian on the Abaluyia, has surmised that Misri could have been located in the Upper Nile region of Karamoja or around the Lake Turkana area. It was from here that the various Luyia clans migrated southwards into the highland regions north and east of Lake Victoria where they settled in the second millennium BCE. Most journeyed into eastern Uganda from where they moved into their present locations between 1598 and 1733. Whereas natural factors (especially drought) accounts for their initial migration from their ancestral homeland of Misri, their second and largest wave of migration from Eastern Uganda was caused by dynastic and domestic disputes, overcrowding, and the quest for more land for cultivation.

While they retained most of their original practices such as farming as they migrated, the Luyia adopted some cultural practices from other communities they encountered in their final area of destination in the Lake Victoria region. For example, following centuries of interaction with the Nilotic groups such as the Nandi and the Maasai, the Luyia came to practice male circumcision, a rite of passage that is still observed by most of the sub-ethnic groups, but in a most passionate way by the Ababukusu, Abatachoni, Abakabras, and

Abatirichi. Inversely, these Nilotic communities also became “Bantuised” by <https://assignbuster.com/luyia-the-third-largest-ethnic-community-in-kenya-history-essay/>

the new Luyia migrants from whom they acquired new linguistic terms. These inter-cultural interactions increased with the settlement, in the first quarter of the sixteenth and the middle of the seventeenth century, of some Maasai clans in the northern Luyia area occupied by the Abatachoni and Abakabaras. Further south close to Lake Victoria, the arrival of the Luo during the last half of the sixteenth and the first quarter of the seventeenth century not only led to the displacement of some Luyia who had settled here, but also to some members of the later, such as the Abasamia, Abawanga, and Abamarachi, who adopted Luo language and customs.

Religion played an essential role in the day-to-day life of the Luyia peoples. Ancestor worship was common but Were was regarded as the supreme deity. Belief in life after death was a key component of this belief system, as were sacrifices performed by elders at the family level. Since such sacrifices involved animal and agricultural products, religion was thus intertwined with modes of production. The Luyia have always been farmers and land is regarded with greatest economic and social significance. In the pre-colonial times, land was communally-owned and put under the trust of the liguru, a clan elder. Cattle were kept by individual households for social functions such as payment of dowry. Trade, mainly of the form of barter exchange, was common with the neighboring Nilotic communities.

Politically, two types of government were discernible amongst the Luyia in the pre-colonial period. Clan-based government headed by elders was common amongst all the sub-ethnic groups except the Abawanga. The elders made political, economic, and social decisions in matters of warfare, legislation, and use of land. Most often, an influential, wise, and impartial

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elder was appointed by the clan elders to direct the affairs of the clan. The elder was variously referred to as omwami, omukali, omukhulundu, omukasa, or weng'oma. This position was highly untenable since an omwami could easily be deposed in case he turned unpopular. For some, security of office was guaranteed by the hereditary nature of that position. Amongst the Abawanga, however, a highly centralized government headed by the Nabongo (king) became the distinct point of difference in political organization with the rest of the Luyia sub-ethnic groups that utilized the clan-based government.

The introduction of British colonial rule in Western Kenya at the beginning of the twentieth century saw the persistence of Luyia cultural systems, while change was also evident. The Nabongo and the Abawanga were used by the British to entrench colonial rule amongst the Abaluyia but with its power emasculated by new administrative institutions such as the Local Native Council. Notable Christian Mission stations that were established in and around Western Kenya with profound impact on the Luyia were the Friends Africa Industrial Mission (Quakers), Church of God, the Mill Hill Mission, and the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC, later, PAG). Introduction of these Catholic and Protestant Christian missions led to loyalty to the Christian new religion by many Luyia peoples, but it was the new missionary schools and later colonial government schools in Western Kenya that provided opportunities for clan heads and their households solidify their influence over their people.

Amongst some Luyia communities such as the Abatachoni and Abakabarasi, traditional religion remained influential. Amongst the Ababukusu, syncretism

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became common as evidenced in the Dini Ya Musambwa religious sect founded by Elijah Masinde in the 1940s. For others such as the Abatirichi and Ababukusu, traditional rites of passage such as male circumcision were continued to define these communities' ancestral customs in spite of a strong presence of Quaker and Catholic influence. One other way in which the Luyia sought to define their cultural identity through the newly introduced Christian institutions was the establishment of African-led independent churches. While they viewed the Christian religion as a necessary means to uphold their social status, the Luyia leaders who broke away from these churches sought to integrate Luyia cultural aspects in their newly founded independent churches. Consequently, Zakayo Kivuli broke away from the PAG and established the all-African African Israel Church Nineveh in 1942, while Saul Chabuka led another breakaway from the PAG in 1952 to establish the African Divine Church. Both of these African churches have since expanded in Western Kenya and amongst neighboring African communities especially the Luo. They are also nationally represented as they are also found in leading urban areas such as Nairobi, Nakuru, Kakamega, Kisumu, and Kitale.

The British colonial government's emphasis on agriculture as the prime economic activity in Western Kenya perpetuated the economic importance of land cultivation amongst the Abaluyia. Cotton and tobacco became important cash crops, but maize emerged as a leading staple and cash crop and has continued to be the case to this day. Commercialization of agriculture had profound changes on Luyia indigenous land tenure patterns that shifted from communal to individual ownership. The existence of the

liguru within the new colonial structures weakened their power over land relations as such power was transferred to chiefs, the Local Native Councils, and native court tribunals. Commercialization of agriculture also had the unintended effect of creating a class of migrant laborers especially amongst the Abalogoli, Abatirichi, and Abanyore peoples where land remained important but scarce. It is not surprising, therefore, that amongst the Luyia, these three sub-ethnic groups provided the bulk of labor migrants to European farms in the White Highlands and into the main urban areas during the colonial period. This orientation towards wage labor was a natural response to decreasing access to arable land, but was also motivated by the need to meet tax obligations as imposed by the state. The need to invest in agriculture, however, remained an ardent objective. Most of them have utilized their off-farm income to purchase land holdings in land-abundant areas of Western Kenya where they form a minority Diaspora.

British colonialism therefore presented both opportunities and challenges to the Luyia. Where colonial threats proved insurmountable, the Luyia sought to engage the colonial government through popular mobilization as was reflected in the various colonial organizations. This ranged from the milder North Kavirondo Tax payers Welfare Association founded in the 1920s, to the more combative North Kavirondo Central Association created in 1932. The later was radicalized by British alienation of land in Kakamega for gold mining in 1931 which directly impacted on the livelihoods of the Abedakho, Abesukha, Abakabaras, and Abalogoli. The Association also mobilized rural protests against enforced British soil conservation measures amongst Luyia farmers in the 1940s, and in this, they were aided by Masinde's Dini Ya

Musambwa. These agrarian protests illustrated the existence of more deep-seated pressure that colonialism visited on the Luyia community, and which became the reason for them to join ranks with other communities in Kenya in the nationalist expressions of the 1950s as seen in the establishment of the Abaluyia Union in 1954. Luyia politicians played a leading role in the emergent national politics leading to Kenya's independence in 1963. These included W. W. W. Awori, Musa Amalemba, J. E. Otiende, and Masinde Muliro. The later was particularly influential within the main opposition party at independence, the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), which dissolved in 1964, a year after independence.

After independence in 1963, the Luyia emerged as one of the three largest influential ethnic groups in Kenya's national politics, the other two being the Kikuyu and the Luo. With national politics adorning a more ethnic orientation in the 1970s and 1980s, the Luyia Masinde Muliro offered a natural national represented of the community, while Martin Shikuku emerged as an ardent critic of the ruling Kenya National African Union (KANU) government that he was part of until early 1980s. Muliro and Shikuku were some of the leading proponents of democratic multi-party movement that came to fruition in Kenya in 1991. These two only represent the large number of Luyia politicians that have been influential in Kenya's national politics. However, sub-ethnic loyalties have been a nemesis of any intended united front in national politics, as seen in the way various Luyia sub-groups have supported different political parties seeking to bring about political and economic change in the country.

Economically, most Luyia households in land-scarce areas have diversified their farm production by turning to cash crops such as tea, coffee, and soybean production. However, maize remains the leading crop especially in land abundant areas in areas, while sugarcane farming is popular in places that cannot support other crops due to existing soil conditions. Following spates of drought and food shortages in Kenya in the 1980s, even a government that tapped into ethnic marginalization as a way of consolidating power found it difficult to ignore the maize reserves in Luyia agricultural areas. Most important, Luyia areas have remained some of the leading labor-exporting zones to other parts of the country, especially urban areas. High population density has compounded the problem of land availability, with the effect that the affected communities have sought for land in land-abundant areas such as the Rift Valley region dominated by the Nandi community of the Highland Nilotic group. Following the “ethnicization” of Kenya’s national politics especially after about 1980, the Luyia diaspora in such areas have become targets in inter-ethnic political conflicts, especially when they have been perceived to pay allegiance to a political powerbase other than that of their hosts. Consequently, and this goes back to the early period of independence, the Luyia have tried to pursue with relative success, a political identity that transcends their sub-ethnic divisions. This is aimed at achieving parity in national politics with communities such as the Luo and Kikuyu that are perceived to present their political cause as unified entities.

Martin S. Shanguhya

Further Reading

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