

Religion among the taita in kenya history essay



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The purpose of this Historical Investigation will be to establish “ to what extent the missionaries and the colonialists changed or influenced the Socio-Economic organization of the Taita People in Kenya up to 1950” and in what ways it may have had an impact, on the community’s cultural beliefs and practices.

This question will be answered using the following texts as the main sources of evidence and other sources encountered during the investigation.

Kenya Ethnic Communities: Foundation of a Nation – Mr. Wanguhu Ng’ang’a.

Casting out Anger: Religion among the Taita in Kenya – Grace Gredys Harris.

I intend on answering the research question with the above sources, by reading and extracting certain information from them that give us an insight to exactly how the missionaries and colonialists influenced the Taita socio-economic organisation.

Then, I will analyse the sources, particularly aspects on religion, culture & tradition and economic activities, especially focusing on the changes that exist that were heavily influenced by the missionaries and colonialists.

Subsequently, I will use general information from my relatives- my mum and my uncle who are members of the Taita community to relate my research to.

Finally, I will conclude using the information I have gathered and see whether or not the missionary visits can be deemed as successful and impactful.

SECTION B: SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

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Before the missionary and colonial influence in the Taita community, there was no sign of Christianity, Islam or any other world renowned religion. The Taita strongly believed in a lot of what in today's world would be known as witchcraft which was a strong foundation of their cultural and traditional beliefs. When the colonialists and missionaries arrived, most of whom were Christians, preached to the locals, built churches and had priests posted to Taita to work there.

Most of the missionaries were Catholic and Anglican and until today, they are still the most dominant in the region. Taita being quite close to Mombasa town, where the Swahili reside, there was also a little Islamic influence from the interaction of the Swahili with the Arabs.

Today, most of the Taitas, including those who do not live in the region itself are Christians and this can be attributed to the missionary activities between the late 1800's and the early 1900's.

The Socio- Economic effects of the missionaries in Taita mainly affected their religious beliefs which then were mainly traditional and cultural. Seeing as spreading the Christian religion was the main objective of the European missionaries, with time

SECTION C: EVALUATION OF SOURCES:

As I had stated in the Plan of Investigation, below are the sources my investigation will be based on:

Kenya Ethnic Communities: Foundation of a Nation -Chapter 4: Eastern Bantu Communities (Wataita) - Mr. Wanguhu Ng'ang'a.[1]

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Casting out Anger: Religion among the Taita in Kenya - Grace Gredys Harris.
[2]

The first piece of evidence intend on using for this investigation is an extract from chapter 4 of the book Kenya Ethnic Communities: Foundation of the Nation which focuses on the Kenyan Coastal Communities. This extract is specifically on the Social and Political Organisation of the Taita people before colonial and missionary influence among the communities. It

The second piece of evidence I intend on using is yet another extract from the book casting out Anger: Religion among the Taita people in Kenya written by Grace Gredys Harris which basically outlines the organization of the Taitas before any colonial or missionary influence in the region.

SOURCE 1: Kenya Ethnic Communities: Foundation of a Nation -Chapter 4: Eastern Bantu Communities (Wataita) – Mr. Wanguhu Ng’ang’a.

This source is written by many authors and specialists in various Kenyan Ethnic communities with the main purpose of education. It was published in July 2008 and it comprises of eight volumes in one.

The book was written to educate the Kenyan people and the rest of the world on the Socio-Economic and Political organization of the Kenyan communities and for researchers to understand the various Ethnic communities. It also gives some historical insight into where many of the communities migrated from.

The value of this book where this source is extracted from is that it is informative and trustworthy because in comparison to other sources I have
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read and members of the Taita community I have interviewed, the information is more or less organisation same. The source is also of great value in the sense that it gives a detailed explanation of the Socio-Economic organisation of the Taita people before missionary influence.

However useful it may be, the source does not state exactly how the missionaries did their work or managed to convince the community out of their cultural and traditional beliefs into Christianity. It also does not talk about the other religions that may have existed at the time. This source does not give a detailed account of religion in relation to missionary influence in the region at the time, but rather gives more information of the Social structure, being family life and structure in the community in the early 1900's.

SOURCE 2: Casting out Anger: Religion among the Taita in Kenya - Grace Gredys Harris.

This text book Casting Out Anger: Religion Among the Taita People by Grace Gredys Harris who was a British Anthropologist who focused her study on the Taita people while she was a lecturer in the University of Rochester. The book was published in by the Cambridge Press.

The purpose of this book is to give insight and information on the Taita people and more specifically religion in relation to military influence in the early 1900's.

It is very detailed and informative in that, it gives a detailed account on the missionary influence in the Coast between the 19th and 20th century. As the

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title suggests, the source does not state much about the other aspects of Socio-Economic organisation, at least not as much as the first source does. It only gives an account on the religious influence and activity in the region.

This section of my investigation also seeks to compare and contrast the sources though assessing their Origin, Value, Purpose and Limitations.

SOURCE 1: Kenya Ethnic Communities: Foundation of a Nation -Chapter 4: Eastern Bantu Communities (Wataita) – Mr. Wanguhu Ng'ang'a.

This source mainly focuses in the social aspect and effects of colonialism on the Taita people and does not state much on the religious influence. From what the sources say and the interviews i conducted, there has not been much change in the social organisation, given that they still conduct the main activities they had been conducting since the 19th century. These activities are mainly farming. The only difference now, in the 21st century is that the crops they farm are not used as family feed only but rather sold to major markets as cash crops. This has become one of the Taita people's main source of income. The main reason for this is that, Kenya is still an LEDC (Less Economically Developed Country) so, most of the country's income is not as industrial as more developed countries and there is still heavy reliance on primary activities as a source of income across the country, not only with the Taita.

Taita is a very sloppy and hilly region which almost works to their disadvantage because they are unable to farm some of the crops that have a high aggregate demand. The main cash crops which are farmed in this

region are cassavas and other tubas, bananas and mainly sisal which is used for making traditional baskets and trays.

The colonialists taught the Taita community how to tap into their natural resources and make a living out of them through large scale farming and by extension, trade.

This source also highlights the household structures, especially of married families, which for people who still live in the region hasn't changes much. Save for the engineering of the houses which were huts made of dries banana leaves, grass and wood or/ and mud to stone houses.

SOURCE 2: Casting out Anger: Religion among the Taita in Kenya – Grace Gredys Harris.

Unlike the first source, the second source concentrates more on the religious influence by missionaries and less on the social structure. The first source tells us that the first encounter the Taita's had with the missionaries was with the Irish Catholic priests and much later, the Anglican missionaries. From other sources which focus on general missionary influence in Africa, this was done in conjunction with the colonialists. This was difficult proving to the language barrier with most of the locals speaking either Kitaita or Kiswahili. This was bridged by the missionaries who had to learn Kiswahili to communicate with the locals. When Christianity was introduced, the locals had to detach themselves from their cultural and traditional beliefs in which they were engrossed and they started attending mass and church services and believing in God rather than their traditional gods. Over time, the locals gave up their traditional beliefs, so much so that now, the traditional beliefs

died and are not practiced anymore with majority of the Taita population being Christians and the minority being Other religions such as Islam.

Another limitation this source may provide is the aspect of the writer being Caucasian thus she may have encountered difficulties while carrying out her research such as language barriers and limited first-hand knowledge of the Taita culture. This claim may be counter balanced by the fact that she was extremely learned and focused most of her study on religion among the Taita.

SECTION D: ANALYSIS OF EVIDENCE.

This section of this investigation seeks to analyse the situation before the missionaries arrived at the Kenyan coast, in terms of culture and tradition i. e. what the locals used to practice and what they believed in both socially and religiously.

BEFORE MISSIONARY ARRIVAL:

Before the missionaries arrived in Native Taita, there were no signs of religion in relation to what it is known as today, that being mainly Christianity.

For one, the cultural grounding was at its peak seeing as there was very little if any interference at all with the other communities, even the neighbouring ones with whom they shares many cultural beliefs and practices. Before making a conclusion on the findings of my historical investigation, it may be necessary to see why it may have been so easy for missionaries to spread

religion through many African states, especially the Taita and explore some of their cultural values and beliefs during this time.

The Taita are said to have migrated from Central Africa along with many other Bantu tribes and eventually settled in the beautiful and fertile Taita hills in Southern Kenya.

There are three important aspects of Taita culture and they are:

- Male circumcision
- Death
- Music and Dance

Male circumcision is performed on all boys between 7 and 11 years of age and this was considered to be training for them because it was assumed that at that age, they were ready for adulthood after the circumcision which was not only the act of circumcising but it involved mentorship by older persons, more often than not, uncles would do the mentorship.

Death was considered sacred by the Taita. It was believed that when one dies, they should be buried only for a year after which their bodies should be exhumed and the skull detached from the rest of the body to be taken to a sacred cave. This ritual was considered to be a sign of respect accorded to the deceased. The bodies were taken to the cave so that the deceased may have their "proper" abode with the ancestors[3].

Lastly, the other important aspect of Taita culture and tradition was music. Music was considered very important and it was often symbolism for

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celebration and jubilation. As much as there were many types of dance which applied to different celebrations, the most popular one is known as the pepo (Spirit) possession dance which in Kitaita (The language the Taitas speak) is known as Mwazindika. The other traditions have since died off and not much is known about them.

The religion among the Taita before missionary influence revolved around the spirits of the ancestors. ³ These spirits and gods were called upon when either something really bad happened or something good happened. For instance, when the land was infertile or when there has been rainfall and there is sufficient food.

The economic activities of the Taita people revolved around farming and this is because there Taita hills were and still are very fertile thus giving the Taita people an advantage over other communities because they did not have to engage in trading activities to provide food for themselves. Before development and enlightenment of the locals, there was limited farming in the sense that, as compared to today, there was very little one could do with land and this owes to development over time which may have begun with both missionary and colonial activity. The main foods consisted of bananas, pumpkins, cassava, beans, sweet potatoes, cowpeas, and millet. ³ These foods, to date make up some of the Taita peoples staple and traditional meals.

DURING MISSIONARY ARRIVAL:

It is said that one of the reasons it was very easy for missionaries to “change” the Taitas cultural beliefs is because the Taitas do not have s

structured society, it is very loose and that made it easier for Western culture be instilled in them.

The missionaries arrived at the Kenyan Coast in the 1850's. The first missionaries to arrive in Taita were the Holy Ghost Fathers from the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church. They built mission stations at Bura and Wusi, built by the Holy Ghost fathers of the Catholic Church.[4]As much as the missionaries may have encountered problems such as language barriers and limited knowledge of Taita culture so it made it almost difficult for them to know which way to approach the locals.

As it may have taken long for the transition to take place, it still happened. Colonialism played a big role in speeding up the transformation and the development process.

SECTION E: CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the missionaries and colonialists had a great impact on the Taita people of Kenya especially since they brought many positive changes to the region thus it was pretty easy for them to successfully introduce Christianity to the region. Also, it took them a while to convince the locals out of their beliefs which they had believed in for a long while, since their settlement in the country. The missionaries began their work circa 1840 and it continued until around the 1950's, before the country got independence. As much as this was a great change in the country, it had its disadvantages because the Taita people lost many of their cultural values and today, many of the Taita people, especially those who do not live in the region have almost no clue on what used their ancestors used to believe in and practice.

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Their dressing, farming skills, eating habits, religious views and traditions are just but a few of the things that have evolved over time and become more western oriented.

Their major crop, which was and still is sisal, was used then to make baskets but since there is very little use for the baskets these days, it is sold to make paper.

Finally, the colonialists and the missionaries helped a great deal in developing and exposing the Taita's to more modern practices and ways of living life which have helped and are still helping them in their day to day social and Economic organisation.

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