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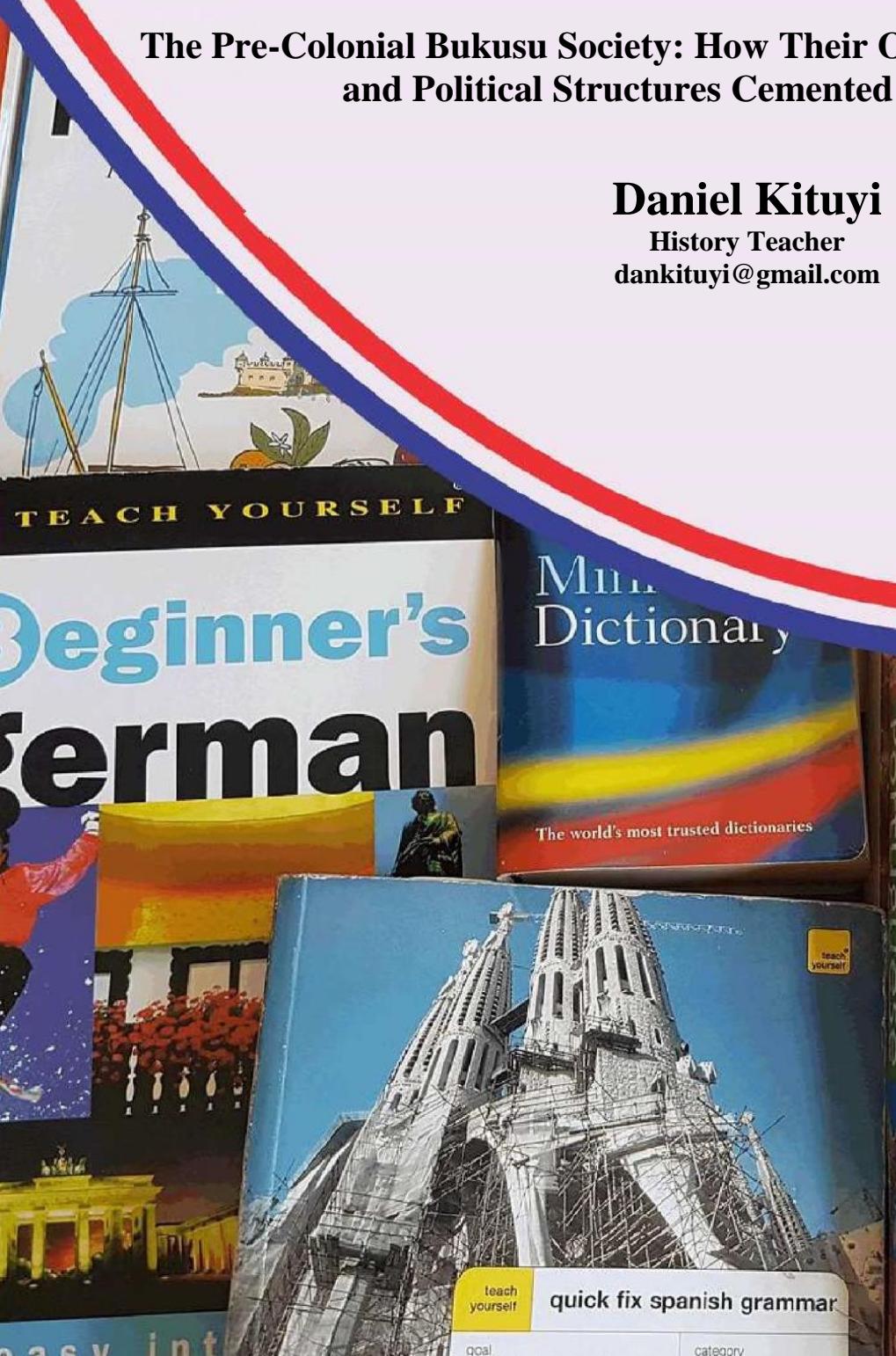
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The Pre-Colonial Bukusu Society: How Their Origin, Migration, Settlement and Political Structures Cemented Them Together

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## ABSTRACT

The Bukusu people are among the top largest group in Kenya and after their migration, they settled in Bungoma. Their early history made them to be a united community. They are believed to have mobilised their resources as a team. This study examined how their origin, migration, settlement and political structure cemented them together to be a solid ethnic community that influenced their common resource mobilization for survival. It is noted herein that since the migration and eventual inception of imperialism, the Bukusu people just like other communities in Kenya had a well-organized political unit that was decentralized, hence they resisted colonization with their weak weapons and since then, the community has been working together politically. During their migration and settling in various places, they were under several leaders who managed to bring them together. Karly Popper's instrumentalism theory and Achille Mbembe's postcolonial theory were the two theories used in the study. This paper relied heavily on archival materials, oral interviews, and a review of linked secondary literature. Convergence and divergence were produced after thoroughly reviewing, analyzing, and compiling all the data. Ex-post facto as a research design was used with purposive and snowball as sampling techniques.

**Key words:** *Pre-Colonial Bukusu Society, Origin, Migration, Settlement & Political Structures*

### 1.0 Introduction

This paper seeks to provide insights into the political organization of the Bukusu during the pre-colonial period. However, to unearth political organization of the Bukusu, the evolution and development of their pre-colonial society within the people's early history of origin, migration and settlement into their present homelands of Bungoma district is examined. While underscoring the centrality of their environment, this paper demonstrates how their traditional institutions and political history shaped their ethnic politics in pre-colonial era. How the migration, early political institutions and its leadership structures of the Bukusu people in pre-colonial period influenced resource mobilization ethnically in post-colonial era is also discussed in this paper. In conclusion, this paper reveals that the genesis of ethnic politics and ethnic mobilization among the Bukusu is in their origin, migration and settlement based on their political organization.

### 2.0 Origins, Migration and Settlement of the Bukusu

To understand the political organization among the Bukusu during the pre-colonial era, a keen examination of their origin, migration and settlement in their homeland in Bungoma district is very important and subsequent brief early history of the community which finally gave the community a homogenous entity.

Migration of the human population is the movement of human beings from one region to the other with intention of looking for good settlement due to harsh condition in their previous settlement. Migration begun with Homo erectus out of Africa thorough Eurasia about 1.75 million years ago and there after several other migrations has been witnessed in the world, among them Neolithic Revolution, Indo-European expansion, Early Medieval Great Migration and the Turki expansion. The more recent migration and settlement into Kenya were the Bantu, Cushites and Nilotes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G.S. Were, *History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya C1500-1930*, (Nairobi 1967), p.12

Gugliotta opines that these communities migrated in search for land for cultivation, grass and water for their livestock while others because of need for adventure.<sup>2</sup> Felicia points out that since the 1920s, political and economic factors have motivated most communities in the country to migrate, often to areas where they constitute ethnic minorities.<sup>3</sup>

Oral evidence revealed that Bukusu belongs to Bantu speakers, and the term Bantu is a common word which is used to refer to over 400 groups of people in Africa ranging from South of the Sahara to South Africa that speak same dialect and practice the same culture. The Bukusu came and settled in their present land in two waves; East Bukusu and West Bukusu. Both Bulimo<sup>4</sup> and Were<sup>5</sup> agree that the cradle land of Bukusu is in a place known as *Misiri*, which is associated with Egypt, this common origin has given the Bukusu ability to unite and work together as a community in terms of mobilisation both politically and materially.

Oral sources also agreed that Misiri is their original homeland and that East Bukusu came up to the River Nile and arrived at *Esamoya* which today is called Jinja. At Esamoya, they saw Lake Victoria which they avoided since their migration from Egypt was tiresome due to long River Nile. This long river Nile forced them to change their migration route through Bugishu<sup>6</sup>. From Bugishu informants noted that they moved to Tororo and while there they wanted a leader to lead them. The leader must be a rich man who has many animals and wives. Two people from two clans emerged to contest over Bukusu leadership at Tororo Hills; that is, Omuyemba and Omubuya. The qualification for a leader was the one with enough milk from his animals, he was to milk animals and go with his milk uphill and pour the milk downhill, the one that will flow to the foot of the hill, will be the leader of the Bukusu people. A contestant who was Omuyemba was clever, he added water in his milk and when he poured his milk it flowered to the foot of the hill. On the other hand, Omubuya with his little milk, it didn't flow down the hill, hence he was not picked the Bukusu leader.<sup>7</sup>

During oral interview it was noted, “the Bukusu kept on looking for leaders whenever they settled after migration. For instance, when they entered Kenya and settled at Mt. Masaba (Mt. Elgon), another leader called Masaba led the Bukusu people. Masaba had two sons, Welemba and Bubukusu. Bubukusu was excommunicated from the community after admiring and sleeping with his father’s young wife. Masaba kept on migrating with his son Welemba and other Bukusu people.<sup>8 9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> G. Gugliotta, *The Great Human Migration*, (Smithsonian 2008), P.56

<sup>3</sup> F. Yieke, “*Ethnicity and Development in Kenya: Lessons from the 2007 General Elections.*” *Kenya Studies Review* (Nairobi 2010), p.11

<sup>4</sup> S. Bulimo, *Luyia Nation: Origins, Clans and Taboos*. Library of Congress: (2013), p351

<sup>5</sup> G.S Were, *History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya C1500-1930*, (Nairobi 1967), p.83

<sup>6</sup> Wekesa, O.I. 6/12/2021

<sup>7</sup> Matolotolo, O.I. 4/12/2021.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, O.I.

<sup>9</sup> KNA/EN/6 Notes on the book A Nilo-Hamitic people living on the southern slopes of Mt. Elgon

Ochieng observed that as the Bukusu migrated, they interacted with other communities like Maasai, Kabras and Kalenjin people because they also believed that they came from the same origin. For instance, Bukusu stayed together with Kiborit and Wamurwe elders from Maasai who were very rich. Oral sources revealed that after migration they settled at Embayi briefly and while at Embayi, a huge snake appeared, the snake used to eat animals of Kiborit and his children. It was very important for Kiborit to kill the snake to avoid all these killings in his family. Therefore, announcement was made to get a courageous man to kill the snake.<sup>10</sup>

A Bukusu man from Bameme clan called Mango wa Nameme emerged willing to face the snake. He was given the task, he went to survey the cave where the snake used to live; he went back home and sharpened the sword (though the two informants differed here, one talked of a sharp stone while another one talked of a sharp sword), then in the evening, he washed his body using a herb called *lufufu* and then smeared himself with ash to remove his sweat from his body so that the snake should not smell him around the cave. Mango hid around the entrance of the cave, and when the snake came back, it entered the cave starting with the tail, then head last, Mango was strategic once the whole body of the snake was in the cave, with head outside watching if there was enemy, Mango swiftly chopped off its head using a sharp sword/stone<sup>11</sup>. Then he used *Sichiriba* to mobilise the community to receive the announcement of good news that he has killed the feared snake, he was celebrated and given *ekutwa* and circumcised as a sign of victory and here is where the origin of Bukusu circumcision came from. This information was of importance to this study because circumcision is one of the key traditional ceremony used by the Bukusu people to mobilise the community together, thus strong ethnic identity.

Oral evidence pointed out that mango was not the originator of circumcision among the Bukusu. Circumcision was there long ago, though it was stopped due to wars and calamities and Mango was just reviving the culture. It was also noted by the informant that: Mango wanted to marry a wife from a particular clan, then he was tasked to kill the snake first, he accepted and killed the snake at the cave in embayi. After killing the snake, the elders from where he was supposed to marry told him, that there is one snake more, and this was to cut his foreskin. Mango accepted and he was circumcised then given a wife, and here is where that informant argue that Mango was not the originator of circumcision, but circumcision was just a condition for marrying.<sup>12</sup> The above information is very crucial to this study because male circumcision among the Bukusu is one of the most mobilising agent in the region.

Were<sup>13</sup> claims that the Bukusu entered Kenya through the Northern side of Mt. Elgon, they settled here briefly before migrating after realising that the soil was not good for cattle keeping. This natural situation forced them to migrate to Mbayi and Sirikwa where they find that soil was good for settlement. Bukusu kept on migrating, now from Mbayi and Sirikwa, they settled at Namarare in Bugishu then moved to Solokho where they settled briefly before moving to Ebwayi in South Teso near Tororo. From Tororo, they entered Kenya and settled in the present land Bungoma

<sup>10</sup> Ochieng' W.R, *An outline History of Nyanza upto 1914* (Nairobi 1974), p.11

<sup>11</sup> Matolotolo, O.I. 4/12/2021

<sup>12</sup> Wekesa, O.I. 6/12/2021.

<sup>13</sup> G.S. Were, *History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya C.1500-1930*, (Nairobi 1967), p.56

District. The experience that Bukusu received while migrating brought them together more, they were able to conquer other communities together as they were migrating and settling in various places.<sup>14</sup>

According to Were<sup>15</sup>, the migration of West Bukusu from Egypt was a bit different. Oral Tradition points at Tabasia and Nabiswa as their first area of settlement from Egypt. Tabasia and Nabiswa was located in Eastern Uganda near Karamoja. Then from there they went to Embayi around Sirikwa thereafter to Sengeri near Chelengani hills in Rift Valley. Due to external conflict with the Kalenjin, they migrated to Namarare, then Muvuya (Tororo) hills. From there the Bukusu migrated to Embayi, Miala and Mwalie (Malakisi). From Mwalie they moved to Ekonyero near Kakamega where they were dispersed to their current land.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth noting that after Bukusu settled in Western Kenya, they lived and interacted with people from other communities both within Bungoma and outside Bungoma among them the Sabot, Tachoni, Bawanga, Teso but overtime, the Bukusu have had a look at themselves as a complete entity different from other communities. This has made them to be mobilised easily to the leaders they agree with and difficult to be mobilised by leaders they oppose.

## 2.1 Tradition institutions and political history among the Bukusu

Oral sources shows that after settling in their land Bungoma District, they lived in walled villages surrounded by a fence, this was necessary for them because they were frequently attacked by their neighbours like the Iteso, Maasai and the Nandi.<sup>17</sup> Makila avers that the Bukusu political organisation was based on exogamous clans; this means that there was no one political unit among the Bukusu. He continues to say that the Bukusu community is under several clans which are also sub-divided into sub-clans.<sup>18</sup>

Sakwa<sup>19</sup> avers that the clan is the smallest political unit and seems to be a powerful political unit where each clan occupied a village known as *Lukoba*. He pointed out that, these clans are related to one another either directly or indirectly by way of patrilineal or matrilineal descent if not by association. In *Lukoba*, Bukusu had political structure where *Omukasa* (elder) was the leader of Lukoba and under him there were other several lesser leaders who led sub-clans and families. Ethnic politics among the Bukusu can be traced here because it appears that no time did the whole of the Bukusu society politically fall under one leadership like the Abawanga of Nabongo Mumia; each clan had its own leaders. This means that there was no ethnic authority, which overruled clan

<sup>14</sup> S. Wandibba, *History and culture in Western Kenya: the people of Bungoma District through time* (Nairobi 1985), p.20

<sup>15</sup> G.S. Were, *History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya C.1500-1930*, (Nairobi 1967), p.68

<sup>16</sup> G.S. Were, *History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya C.1500-1930*, (Nairobi 1967), p.68

<sup>17</sup> Wekesa, O.I. 6/12/2021..

<sup>18</sup> F.E. Makila, *An Outline History of the Babukusu*, Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, (Nairobi 1978), P.66

<sup>19</sup> Sakwa, *A history of the political organization of Wang'a*, C.1880-1926 (Nairobi 1971), p.8

authorities, either in their dealings with foreign ethnicities or in the management of their internal affairs.<sup>20</sup>

Bukusu leadership structure is as follows: *Omukasa* was a vital leader among the Bukusu because he did not only play the political role, but also played the function of the judge and at the same time the priest. *Bakasa* were given tasks to ensure that there was peace in their areas and they achieved this by settling disputes among people in the community. Under *Omukasa* there were other lesser leaders called ‘*omwami wa lichebe*’ who assisted *Omukasa* to solve some disputes in the community.<sup>21</sup> Below *Omwami wa Lichebe*, there existed the council of elders among the Bukusu who played a key role in conflict solving, especially those involving more than one family. The council of elders had special attires which they wore in a special occasion. The special attire was made from animal skin and they used to put on *ekutwa* (hat) which was also made of animal skin. In special meeting, the council of elders used to hold spears in their hands and a shield symbolising they are responsible for protecting the community. Special chairs were made for council of elders and they used to move with them wherever they went. At the lowest level of Bukusu leadership was the father<sup>22</sup>.

The father played a great role within the family. He was the head of the family this means that he had powers over the wives, and children, although he was responsible to his ancestral spirits and to his lineage relatives. The father, council of elders and the *omwwami wa lichebe* worked together to solve disputes in the clan, however when the matters were above them, they referred to the *Omukasa* who handled wider matters that pose threat to the entire community. As in much as they did all these duties, they were not formerly paid, though they received gifts from people they helped in the society. This leadership of *Omukasa* was not hereditary, a leader ruled until he died or he retired and in case of such, the elders in the community are tasked to look for another leader who has the required qualifications.<sup>23</sup>

Oral evidence clearly revealed that there were qualification of leaders among the Bukusu people, however there was no formal appointment or installation of *babami* (leaders). The appointment of *babami* was done basing on age. The Bukusu believed that elderly men were suitable leaders because they were closer to the dead who linked them to god hence people were to treat them with respect. Circumcision through age grade played a key role to determine the right age for leadership. A part from age, economic wealth played a role to determine who should lead among the Bukusu. Elderly men with large number of cattle, sheep and goats were better option for leadership. Wealth was also determined by the number of granaries one has and they have to be filled with farm produce in all seasons.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> KNA/ *The village headmen Ordnance of 1902*

<sup>21</sup> KNA/ *The Village headmen Ordinance of 1912*

<sup>22</sup> P. Wekesa, *Politics and nationalism in Colonialism in colonial Kenya: the case of Babukusu of Bungoma 1894-1963* (Nairobi 2000), p.57

<sup>23</sup> Wekesa, O.I. 6/12/2021.

<sup>24</sup> Violet, O.I. 28/12/2021

Many wives one had was also a measure for a good leader among the Bukusu. It was argued that if one can control his wives and children then he can control the entire clan. Were observes that another unique indicator for *Omwami* was if he was a tough warrior where this was measured by the number of people he killed in the war against other communities. Possessing all these was not easy unless one was a son of the previous outstanding leader in the society, hence ethnic leadership. Women leadership among the early Bukusu society was not recognized at all.<sup>25</sup>

Leadership and traditional institutions among the Bukusu would not be complete without discussing on the military possession of the Bukusu people. The migration of most African communities enlightened them to possess weapons because in most cases as they were migrating, they encountered enemies on their way; hence they had to fight them to reach their destination. Since the Bukusu migrated differently into Kenya, they did not have a common military force under one leader. During the pre-colonial period, each clan among the Bukusu organized their own militaries on attacking and defending themselves. The clan had leaders who took them to war, these leaders were known as '*naitirian*' meaning a strong and courageous young man. However the '*naitirian*' had to seek permission from a clan leader before they attack or defend the community. For one to qualify into '*military force*', he was to undergo circumcision ritual as a sign of bravery, just the way Mango did it when he killed a huge snake.<sup>26</sup>

After circumcision young men underwent training to join age set that led them into military. For warriors to attack another community, rituals were vital to protect the fighters in the battle. Spiritual people are called to conduct ritual and foretell the outcome of the war, above all to provide the charms that will protect the fighters and Namutala was good at this.<sup>27</sup> The Bukusu fighters just like other communities, they did not have sophisticated weapons. Wesonga<sup>28</sup> notes that the Bukusu used weapons like spears, swords, sticks and shields that were locally made by skillful men in the community. The Bukusu military evolved with the interaction with other communities and having strong leaders like Mukite wa Nameme. When Arab traders started to pass across their territory to Uganda, they acquired other new weapons like guns either through buying or stealing from them.<sup>29</sup>

Were<sup>30</sup> observes that Mukite Wa Nameme was a young orphan boy among the Bukusu who was born in 1790s. He grew into a strong and fearless man who mobilised his kinsmen to come together and fight for their land which had been alienated by the *bamia* and *bawanga*. Mukite built forts and trained Bukusu warriors, addition to that Mukite acquired weapons for his military. Mukite was a military strategist who divided his army into three; intelligence, the front guard and the rear

<sup>25</sup> G.S. Were - "*Politics, Religion and Nationalism in Western Kenya, 1942-1962*,, (Nairobi 1972), P.192

<sup>26</sup> P. Wekesa, *Politics and nationalism in Colonialism in colonial Kenya: the case of Babukusu of Bungoma 1894-1963* (Nairobi 2000), p.58

<sup>27</sup> Wekesa, O.I. 6/12/2021

<sup>28</sup> R. Wesonga, "*The Pre-colonial Military Organisation of the Bukusu*", (Nairobi 1985), p.5

<sup>29</sup> KNA, DC/NN 6/1/1 *The African Soldiers Speaks 1944*

<sup>30</sup> G.S. Were, *History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya C.1500-1930*, (Nairobi 1967), p.135

guards. This enabled him to win several battles among them between the Bamia, Maasai, Tachoni and Kalenjin.<sup>31</sup> The above information is relevant to this study because traditional institutions and early political organisation of the Bukusu cemented them together to be a solid community for political mobilisation.

### 3.0 Conclusion

In this paper it has been demonstrated that the origin, migration and settlement of the Bukusu in the pre-colonial period shaped their political history which eventually was the seed for ethnic politics and ethnic mobilisation among the Bukusu. The paper has noted that the migration and settlement of the Bukusu in various places clued them together politically hence easy for mobilisation in any manner. The early political history of the Bukusu affirms that; ethnic politics and mobilisation is rooted in the pre-colonial era. This chapter demonstrates that leaders among the Bukusu were chosen based on gender entity and from a particular family, which translates to the current leadership style where positions in leadership are reserved for a particular family or ethnic in the region. It is noted in this chapter that for early communities to survive, weapons were key and therefore Bukusu had a military base built basically on young men under leadership of elders. In summary, the debate between postcolonial theory and instrumentalism is not only relevant when it comes to generally analysing already established ethnic identities, but is also useful for describing the transition from pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial ethnic identities, a dynamic which has often been termed Ranger as “the colonial invention of tradition.” At first glance, it might seem easy to argue that pre-colonial identities were more primordial and were then erased and recreated in an opportunist, instrumentalist negotiation between European and African interests. However, despite it being clear that the colonial situation had a crucial impact on African ethnicities, the case is not as simple.

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