

# Ethnic and Cultural Interaction between the Early Migrant Groups in Yimbo of Western Kenya

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**Abstract** Inter-ethnic relations entail a wide range of interactions by members of diverse tribes in a given geographical space. This work aimed at determining the nature of inter-ethnic interactions among communities in Yimbo of Western Kenya. The study was conducted in Yimbo; Usigu Division within Bondo Sub-County. The study employed The Race Relations Cycle theory that holds that racial or ethnic contacts lead to competition, accommodation and eventual assimilation of cultural or ethnic groups. Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were employed to arrive at the respondents for data collection. Interview guides, Focus Group Discussion guides and archival records were used for data collection. Thematic data analysis assisted in data analysis and finally data interpretation and synthesis were undertaken. The findings of the study pointed out that the history of cultural interaction in Yimbo region goes back to at least the last millennium B.C during which time the Rift Southern Cushitic speakers had spread to Western Kenya and beyond into Northern and Central Tanzania, as well as, into the South Western side of Lake Victoria. Interaction begun from migration times the period of settlement up to the post-independence period. It involved borrowing or exchange of ideas and cultural traits possibly leading to cultural exchange and assimilations through processes of warfare, trade, and intermarriage.

**Keywords** Cultural interaction, Migration, Settlement, Ethnic interaction, Early migrant groups, Yimbo, Western Kenya

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## 1. Introduction

Inter-ethnic relations entail a wide range of interactions by members of diverse tribes in a given geographical space. The main concern of the present study was to map a history of inter-ethnic relations in Yimbo from 1800-2002. Historically, Yimbo was the entry point into Nyanza and Western regions for many ethnic groups. Many scholars have dealt only with general successive waves of migratory and isolated cases of linguistic and cultural groups such as the Cushites, Nilotes, Bantus or larger tribes like the Luo, Kalenjin and Kikuyus. However, this study sought to provide an understanding of cultural interaction of ethnic groups that probably led to community cohesiveness and improved communication across the various ethnic groups in Yimbo region.

## 2. Research Context

It is still unclear which methods should be adopted to foster fair relations among ethnic groups. Literature on

inter-ethnic interactions between communities of Yimbo is scarce in Kenya. There seems to be mere explanations as to what keeps groups apart than on what keeps or can bring them together. Therefore, in determining the nature of communities in Yimbo, this study tried to explain cultural interaction of the different ethnic groups leading to either a sense of belonging to the larger Yimbo region as means to unity in diversity. The study also tried to identify how communities were brought together by mutual needs and goals. The present study examined ethnicity as a source of unity among diverse communities. Previous scholars who have studied ethnicity and its relations, especially in relation to major groups like Luo, Kalenjin, Masaai and Kikuyu, have not been careful to show whether or not the occupants of Yimbo have been interacting over a long period of time. This is because in most studies, there is conflicting information or contradictions on tribal, linguistic affiliation, ethnic group or clan histories.

## 3. Literature Review

The relationships between kinsmen and members of one's ethnic group are still cherished by many Africans. It is evident that when people living side-by-side share the same pool of symbols and grow together in the same community, experiencing similar socialization processes;

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they are also exposed to the same worldview, which in turn reinforces their ethnic identity. This explains why in most cases ethnic groups are found to be staying together with other groups. Similar to what Otite (1994) terms as civilization, Africa provided some of the earliest forms of human organizations and several centres of ancient civilization. Giving an example of Egypt, Otite explains that Africans embraced a moral attitude to material wealth, display of brotherly concern for one another, denunciation of extreme individualism and the prosperity and harmony of society (Otite, 1994).

Barth (1969) argues that ethnic boundaries result from social interactions, not isolation. Moreover, ethnic boundaries are not sustained because of traditional cultural differences, but because of political differences. He concludes that ethnicity is a political process by which people seek to form groups, and to differentiate one set of people from another, by appealing to the idea of ineluctable cultural practice. Barth contends that ethnicity is the pursuit of political goals – the acquisition or maintenance of power, the mobilisation of a following – through the idiom of cultural commonness and difference. In other words, ethnic groups are not a necessary or natural outcome of creation of cultural beliefs and practises but a creation of politics and ideology.

Kenya as a nation is a multi-ethnic society, which provides for “unity in diversity”. It has forty-three ethnic groups, the five major ones being the Kikuyu, Luo, Kamba, Kalenjin and Luhya. The smaller tribes include the Ogiek, Njemps, Abasuba and Makonde (the 43<sup>rd</sup> ethnic group in Kenya). Ethnicity in Kenya has taken the centre stage so that it constitutes the headlines of local broadcasts on a daily basis. Negative ethnicity in Kenya has generally been on the increase, and its massive effects are manifested in underdevelopment and sometimes ethnicity-related conflicts. The 2007/2008 post-elections violence is the most recent example of the catastrophic effects of negative ethnicity in Kenya. Faced with economic recession occasioned by post-election violence of 2008 in which food prices sharply increased and persisted, many rural folk came face-to-face with starvation. However, looking at the situations in other African states, including the Burundian genocide, Rwandan ethnic cleansing, recurring ethnic tensions in Nigeria and wars in Somalia, it is evident that Kenya has indeed remained stable amidst these ethnic turmoil and conflicts that continues to host a large number of refugees from many African states (Otite, 1994).

Different ethnic groups have realized that there is no need to continue ethnic rivalry. They have instead tried to work together towards the shared goal of development. Such cooperation has given hope for sustainable development in areas where inter-ethnic relations are encouraged. For a community to be termed as experiencing harmonious relations, the members must appreciate non-violence, that is, they must try to avoid, as much as possible, violent confrontations; subsequently, they must

choose peaceful means to achieving their mutual goals. At the same time, there is need to recognize the existence of other groups with unique differences. Recognising and appreciating the members of diverse groups paves the way for harmonious co-existence in society (Bar-Tai, 2004).

The achievement of good social relations does not happen automatically. Without deliberate efforts towards harmony, groups may stay in conflict for decades and even centuries. They will continue to discriminate and exploit one another for many years, so much so that when ideas of unity are mentioned they are rejected immediately. As such, efforts towards unity must receive the support of the members of society. Bar-Tai (2004) comments that unity and peace efforts must be transmitted and disseminated to all members of society to ensure everyone understands and is motivated to change. Once society members are persuaded to support such ideas, they must be helped to internalize them, thus leading to change of beliefs, attitudes, emotions and behaviours.

Colson (1951), in her study of the Tonga and aliens in Zambia, observes that the aliens were well assimilated to create an ethnically homogenous society in the country. Nevertheless, at times, there is some hostility towards the aliens in Zambia. In the case of Zambia, however, the aliens did not lose their identity but became the owners of the region. It is important to stress that the ethnic groups encountered in Africa today have emerged through interactions, fusion and adaptation to different ecological contexts, because for a long time, the notion of single origins dominated African history (Ogot, 2003).

Nyukuri (1997), writing on the trajectory of ethnicity in Kenyan politics, observes that the British colonialists sharpened ethnic differences in the country’s socio-political landscape. Indeed, before the colonialists penetrated the territories of Africans, the notion of geographical boundaries were non-existent. Nyukuri points out that in the nineteenth century, the area that became “Kenya” was stateless; the different groups co-existed peacefully and complemented one another, and there was no centralised power to arrange groups in hierarchical relations. It has also been documented that people of different cultural backgrounds interacted in total devoid of ethnic conscience, and cultural limitations coached in stereotypes, prejudices and bigotry were non-existent.

Lonsdale (2002) in his argument on ethnicity and national citizenship posited that everyone in the world is reared within some ethnic tradition of civility. Those without such traditional discipline are regarded as hooligan underclass – what Kenyatta feared would be the consequence of “detrribalisation”. But if it’s agreed that ethnicity is the cradle of sociability, why is it not possible for that training in proper self-contact be transferred to the Kenyan nation, to combat the politicians’ manipulation of political tribalism? This might be one of those questions best answered with reference to comparative history of other multi-cultural nations as suggested above. He

proceeded to argue that all Kenyan ethnic groups are high breed, with multiple origins. He further questioned; what about the pre-colonial histories of inter-ethnicity: why are some clan names shared across ethnic and linguistic boundaries? How and why did different groups have similar age-grades or generational institutions and rituals? Why were East African styles of dress, ornaments and armament alike? Why and in what circumstances could one look for inter-ethnic trust? No tribe can survive on its own and that has always been the case – a history that should be better known, even though the evidence will not be easy to document, hence the need to study ethnicity and ethnic inter-relations.

Before the colonial period, the largest named unit found among the Tonga comprised a small neighbourhood community, which formed the basis of much of the daily life and had considerable importance in the thinking of people. Each neighbourhood was once a ritual community united in service to a shrine or asset of shrines and within the neighbourhood, men had to settle their disputes with one another though formal authority existed. Ritual offices existed within the neighbourhood, but political office was embryonic or non-existent until central government recognized headmen and chiefs and later developed a local council with an appointed civil service. Tonga has had little respect for authority. In the past, men with wealth, personality and luck could attract followers from within them and the neighbourhood but they had influence rather than authority. Due to this, they occasionally needed power because they controlled a following that could exert force (Colson, 1951).

The neighbourhood extended to vicinity, which represented the region within the spread of kinship ties and marriage alliances. It safeguarded the visitors and encouraged the settlement of outstanding differences among those who were periodically drawn together by the obligation and rituals of kinship. Within this area, men and women could move freely as members of a familiar community, without the need to involve special precautions. Once outside the vicinity, a man became an alien who travelled at his own risk or guaranteed by formal ties of bond friendship or those forged with influential men who agreed to offer protection in return for such drainage as the traveller could offer. It did not matter whether one was a Tonga speaker or a man of another linguistic group, but in either case, he was an alien. It was the outsiders who first grouped Tonga-speakers together under a common term which has generally been adopted by the people it designates.

Aliens who spoke other languages could be distinguished from aliens in general; those of Tonga speakers and those of foreigner speech. This is because, among the Tonga, people were grouped into three namely, Valley Tonga, Plateau Tonga and Tokeya Tonga. All aliens were, therefore, equally strange and equally acceptable. Any alien could settle and rise to full membership in a new community if he found acceptance among its people. A man or woman who

built a house and cultivated for one year in a new neighbourhood thereby establishing an effective residence had witnessed the old rule, that such a person had the same right as the native born to die and be buried in its soil without the pollution of the earth (Colson, 1951).

Regarding the absorptions of aliens, in their introduction to African political systems, Fortes and Pritchard (1948) briefly talks of the ease with which aliens are absorbed into the general population in differing types of political systems. They contend that centralized authority and administrative organization seem to be necessary to accommodate culturally diverse groups without a simple political system, especially if they have different modes of livelihood (Fortes and Pritchard, 1940). In the so-called stateless societies, aliens quickly lose their foreign identities to become one with their hosts as conquerors. Centralized government could, therefore, be expected to be associated with ethnic heterogeneity, those lacking differentiated authority systems show homogeneity, which belies the actual history of their recruitment. The observations of the two scholars are supported by more recent studies of state and stateless societies in various parts of Africa including Yimbo. The Yimbo was formerly a stateless society, but later had a centralized government, which was associated with ethnic heterogeneity that encompassed about 53 ethnic groups. From this it became homogenised in the nature of the language they were speaking which has become Dholuo.

The Acholi occupy much of the Northern border of Uganda with some of them living across the international border in Southern Sudan. The creation of Acholi society and collective identity did not commence with the colonial rule, rather it began early by the seventeenth and eighteenth century and become firmly entrenched by 1880. By the late seventeenth century, the present Acholi District was essentially a frontier region where Central Sudanic and Eastern Nilotic worlds met. Atkinson (1999) argues that before the formation of the Acholi society, Acholi was essentially a frontier region, where Central Sudanic and Eastern Nilotic worlds (Ateker) met. Central Sudanic were the earliest to arrive and form the majority, settled in the West and North West that corresponds roughly with Kilak County. On the other hand, the Eastern Nilotic, the Ateker that came from the East, settled largely in the South Eastern and Central areas that currently covers the Omoro County. The Western Nilotic groups began to arrive in the Acholi and as few as they were, they settled in the South West and South East and this was the area that was to be called “The Luo Triangle”, which corresponds to the Aswa County. Acholi was by then a peripheral part of the world. Perhaps this was only a region or a peripheral part of the Luo world.

Acholi then became in the making, a new social order and political culture. They were established throughout Acholi, a process that began to transform the desperate inhabitants of the area into a single society with a developing collective identity and eventually ethnic identity. The new order was characterised by larger-scale socio-political structures, the chiefdoms, superimposed over

lineages that by the end of eighteenth century numbered seventy. Each chiefdom, whatever its size and power, had its hereditary ruler or *Rwot* (plural *Rwodi*). Atkinson (1999) concludes that the establishment of a new, more centralized socio-political order in Acholi and subsequent spread of the Luo language there, resulted primarily from the introduction and spread of new institutions, ideology, and structures derived from Paluo and ultimately from Bunyoro-Kitara.

Atkinson (1999) further contends that the changes that produced social order and political culture, which in turn provide the bases for an Acholi societal and ethnic identity, began before the arrival of the Luo and that the ethnic and societal identity were in the making all the time. A close scrutiny reveals that the processes by which the seventy chiefdoms were founded as well as their fundamental ideology were similar across Acholi. However, there were some differences in both the population of the chiefdoms and the number of the associated village, lineages in them varied considerably. The five largest chiefdoms by the eighteenth century were Lira, Paluo, Pabo, Payira, Padibe and Palabek that had a population of about five thousand by 1790.

Although it is easy to categorize the people of, say, Western Kenya as Luo, Abaluhya, Abagusii, Kalenjin and others, the more one studies the composition, the more one finds that their ancestors were in fact, mixed. Were (1967) and Ogot (1999) argue that there were no watertight ethnic categories between cultural groups in Kenya before colonialism. Similarly, Muriuki (1974) demonstrates how by eighteenth and nineteenth centuries various cultural groups in Eastern, Central, and Rift Valley Provinces in Kenya had intimate relations with one another in total disregard for ethnicity, and the scenario only changed after East African region was declared a protectorate in 1895. Were (1974) cautions against the tendency to associate African societies with homogenous origins and cultures. He argues that, contrary to common beliefs, ancestors from diverse ethnic groups founded tribes. This means that tribes do not constitute homogenous communities (Osogo, 1975). It is because of the contributions by the above scholars that the present study sought to undertake an in-depth analysis of the history of inter-ethnic relations in Kenya, with a particular focus on Yimbo in Siaya County from the year 1800 to 2002.

Kenya is a multi-ethnic society. The cultural differences in the country offers opportunities for unity in diversity and, like any other nation, Kenya has its unique approach on ethnicity. Various scholars have carried out studies on the pre-colonial structures of the Abaluhya (Were, 1967), Luo (Ogot, 1967), Abagusii (Ochieng, 1974), Kipsigis (Mwanzi, 1977) and Marakwet (Kipkorir, 1973). Kenya is considered one of the most ethnically fragmented societies in Africa. Most of these ethnic groups are cultural amalgams, so that one has the extra problem of portraying these societies in a dynamic manner to show how different peoples, with different cultures and speaking different languages, are

constantly combining to create new societies with new cultures and speaking new languages.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework - The Cycle of Race Relations Theory**

The Cycle of Race Relations was postulated by Robert E. Park (1964). It maintains that when racial or ethnic groups come into contact, a specific sequence of events is set into motion. Park expressed his view as follows: "In the relations of races there is a cycle of events which tends everywhere to repeat itself..." The Race Relations Cycle holds that racial or ethnic contacts lead to competition, accommodation and eventual assimilation in that order. These processes are apparently progressive and irreversible. Customs, regulations, immigration restrictions and racial or ethnic barriers may slacken the tempo of the movement, may perhaps halt it altogether for a time, but cannot change its direction, cannot at any rate, reverse it (Park, 1964).

The stages of this cycle are the processes by which the integration of peoples and cultures has always and everywhere taken place (Park, 1964). Groups of people first come into contact through exploration or migration. Once they are in contact, a competition between groups is set into motion for land, natural resources, and various goods and services, a competition in which violent conflict frequently erupts. This is what Hebert Spencer (2010) termed as "progress through struggle", in that competition is a true feature of human species. Spencer argued that life is characterized by imperfection and that the imperfect would not be able to compete with those who are perfect to the environmental conditions. Essentially, he applied the notion of survival for the fittest to the social environment.

After a period, Park (1964) said, overt conflict becomes less frequent as one of the two groups establishes dominance over the other. The groups develop some fairly regular or customary ways of living together; at this point, they are said to have accommodated to one another. An accommodation exists when the "antagonism of the hostile elements is, for the time being, regulated, and conflict disappears as overt action, although it remains latent as a potential force" (Park & Burgess, 1921). It may last for many generations or for only a short period.

#### **5. Objective of the Study**

To determine the nature of inter-ethnic interactions among communities in Yimbo of Western Kenya. This was a melting pot of various ethnic groups where they sojourned and therefore a mixed up of cultures. It was from this mixed up of cultures and various ethnic groups where new divergent languages also emerged hence determining their nature and further development. Be that as it may, the settlement of various groups in this area was therefore as a result of both conflicts and harmonious relationship.

## 6. Study Methodology

The study was conducted in Yimbo; Usigu Division within Bondo Sub-County. Yimbo currently harbours five locations, namely North Yimbo, South Yimbo, West Yimbo, Central Yimbo and Mageta Island in Siaya County, Kenya. The area under study stretched northwards to the mouth of River Yala at Nangoba in Bunyala Location of Busia County. To the East, it borders Alego, covering the sweep of Lake Gangu, following the course of Yala River to Bondo in the present-day Sakwa. The Southern part of this frontier was porous, for it depended largely on the military fortunes of Yimbo and Sakwa People. Westwards, Yimbo territory stretched into Lake Victoria covering the Islands of Mageta, Sirigombe, Ng'eye, Wayasi, Siro, Hama, Nyamgaya and Lolwe. Yimbo exhibits a unique mix of various ethnic groups living together such as Kadimo, Kamageta, Kagwa, Walowa, Wahenye, Goma, Wasenge, Wahumadhi, Wanyejra Karodi, and Kowil among others, which formed the target ethnic groups under study. The target population of this study was derived from the overall population of Yimbo. This included members of the Siaya County assembly, chiefs, clan heads, sub-chiefs, MCAs, village elders, businessmen, clergy, elderly people in Yimbo and all the interested stakeholders.

Purposive sampling involved deliberate targeting of a group of people believed to be reliable for the study. The power of purposive sampling method lies in selecting information rich cases for in-depth analysis related to the central issues being studied. Snowball sampling was also applied; the researcher used respondents to get other respondents. Snowball or chain sampling is one form of purposive sampling; it begins by asking people who know a lot about the area of research to recommend other respondents who have information that will be relevant to the study objectives.

Interview guides were constructed in line with research objective and used to obtain information from the respondents. It provided a written list of questions that needed to be covered during the interviews. Archival records at the national archives, university libraries, and national libraries were used to collect data on the subject matter. Archives consist of records that had been selected for permanent or long-term preservation on grounds of their enduring cultural, historical, or evidentiary value. Archival records were unpublished and unique, unlike books or magazines for which many identical copies existed.

Focus Group Discussions of about 6-12 individuals were composed by the researcher, with the help of the chiefs and clergy. This exercise was conducted with a broad range of representation within the ethnic groups, which enabled the triangulation of findings and incorporation of a wide range of perspective. The discussions were carefully designed to obtain information on the participants' knowledge on communities' settlements and their social economic transformation.

Data analysis was purely qualitative in nature based on

thematic data analysis where information were categorised along themes as per study questions.

## 7. Study Findings

The area in Western Kenya, which used to be called 'Kavirondo' presents a very good example of how people with different ethnic backgrounds, interacted in the form of marriage and trade, thus selectively exchanged cultural traits and ideas between these groups. An analysis of this process based on oral traditions presents numerous problems. People who were otherwise Ababukusu, Abakisa, Abawanga, Abakabras, Abanyole, Abatiriki, Abaidakho, and so forth have consolidated into a group called the Abaluhya (Were, 1974), while those who were Joka-Jok, Joka-Owiny and Joka-Omolo have formed the Luo (Ogot, 1967), claiming a common ancestry and cultural heritage. Yet more people who should otherwise be associated with the Baganda and the Gikuyu have emerged as distinct groups, namely the Maragoli, the Gusii and the Kuria (Ochieng, 1974). In the midst of all these mergers and emergencies, does anything remain for a historian upon which development of the cultural ideas of the people could be analyzed? This has been investigated in this study with respect to the Luhya.

Ogot (1967) who did more elaborate work on the history of migrations and settlement of the Luo, noted that their migration and settlement did not occur in an organized way. Their settlement was not a unified invasion, which was planned and executed consciously and deliberately. The whole operation was diversified, irregular and unorganized. Each of the sub-tribes or sub-groups that later evolved into sub-tribes, acted independently and often against one another. The conquest was, therefore, a result of independent sub-tribal and clan warfare rather than a tribal invasion with a conclusive campaign under a single leader. The period also marked the gradual change from a nomadic to a sedentary life, which, in political field was characterized, by change from statelessness to chieftainship. During this period, according to Ogot (1967), there is no evidence to show that new comers attempted to conquer or impose their way of life on the former inhabitants. It is even doubtful whether the Luos regarded their settlement on Ramogi Hill as permanent settlement. What appears to have happened is a small band of nomads settled on the periphery of Agricultural population and so long as they were safe with adequate pasture for their cattle, they preferred to maintain a state of coexistence with other ethnic groups. The Luo occupation of Nyanza, as Ochieng' observed, was haphazard and spread over a long period. Indeed, until the colonial period, the Luo were still colonizing parts of South Nyanza (Ochieng, 1975).

The most important areas of settlement before the arrival of the Luo were Yimbo and Samia. These adjacent settlements have been associated with very early Bantu civilizations. The Samia culture was a village culture, based on fishing, simple crop production and increased craft specialization, mostly in pottery, and iron smelting, as well

as blacksmithing. Along the Lakeshore, and on the Islands to the South of Samia was the Yimbo culture. The Bantu civilization of Yimbo was based on fishing accompanied by some sedentary agriculture on the mainland.

The crowning bond of this Nyanzian Culture lay not in the material culture but in communication and inter-marriage. In particular, the communities of Yimbo and Samia were oriented primarily towards Lake Victoria and they had ties with the Islands of Jagusi, Sigulu, Lolwe and Mageta.

Cohen (1972) suggests that: -

It is not entirely impossible that the Lolui (Lolwe) peoples visited the sites in Central Nyanza (Siaya and Kisumu Districts), made their pots, and returned to settlements on Lolui, or that there was some sort economic symbiosis or trade between the Lolui Islanders and the pot making group in the main land... (Cohen, 1972).

The history of the region before the Luo arrived is difficult to reconstruct, as the original inhabitants either gave way to the invading Lwo speakers or took to Luo speaking by adopting Luo culture. What is apparent is that, though the area was predominantly Bantu speaking, there were differing people like the Gusii, Kalenjin, Maasai and even pygmies living in the area (Ogot, 1967). One could reasonably argue therefore, that by the time the Luo arrived, Nyanza was already a mosaic of many cultural groups. The Luo simply added to an already very complex cultural situation in the region.

From Busoga, the Luo moved into Nyanza in three waves (Ogot, 1967). The first of their lot to arrive was Joka-Jok, who in their course of the Southern trek, built a home at *Ligala* (which means home) in Samia Bugwe only a few miles after they crossed River Sio. It is reasonable to argue that Bantu populations in the area checked their movement and that they stayed with the Bantu for nearly a century, during which time they inter-married and exchanged cultural traits. Meanwhile scouts were sent ahead to survey the land upon whose return the group moved to Ramogi Hill led by a certain Idi. They later named the hill after their leader or progenitor. It could be suggested that the hill could be named after their original home around Lamogi hill in Sudan. Three or four generations later, saw the arrival of Owiny and Omolo groups who sparked off Luo expansions along the Lake Victoria shores.

The Luo of Kenya like their kin in Sudan and Uganda were pastoralists. The reason for this pastoral mode of life was that in their original homeland, there were vast stretches of land much of which were not sustainable for extensive cultivation. As they moved from one area to the next, looking for good pasture for their herds of cattle, they remained semi-nomadic with cattle as the mainstay of their economy. Even on their arrival and settlement in Western Kenya, the Luo still practiced pastoralism. Cattle and other domestic animals were reared which served a variety of purposes. Cattle were used in paying bride wealth and for sacrifices. Nevertheless, the practice of cattle rearing among the Luo

decreased with time. This was because, as Professor Ogot puts it: -

As the Luo migrated Southwards into Uganda and Kenya they arrived and settled in forested places where an agricultural community was more conveniently practiced than a pastoral one (Ogot, 1967).

This change resulted into a decrease in dependence on cattle. Thus, they started mixing agriculture with pastoralism. Among the crops, they planted were *oduma* (maize), *budho* (yam) and *bel* (millet). The nature of land was suitable for extensive pastoralism. The area of Ramogi Hill and further to the East in what is now Alego was suitable for large scale human, as well as, cattle settlement. Their goats and cattle were easy prey for carnivorous animals like lions and leopards.

There were severe handicaps to the rearing of cattle. However, the wild animals posed great challenge to farming. Buffalo and bushbuck were especially fond of maize and millet. The other menace included elephants, wild pigs, monkeys and hippos. The Luo were, therefore, compelled to engage in hunting to safeguard their crops and secure supplies of meat. The flesh of animals was eaten while their skins were used for making slippers and heavy shields (kuot) (Oriaro: oi: 2017).

The shift from a pastoral culture to an agricultural one does not seem to have had a great change in the Luo culture, as far as sacrificial ceremony was concerned. The victims of their ceremonies were oxen, goats or fowls. On the other hand, their attitude towards land changed as they realized that their livelihood depended on the fertility of the land. The concept of fertility came to be understood in a broader sense, as the fertility of the fields -*lowo en min ji* (meaning the land is the mother of the people), and of the families. On the other hand, fertility of land depended on the continuity of life and society's relationship with their ancestors.

When the Luo arrived in Western Kenya, trade with their neighbors was not unknown to them. Those of them who started their migration from Western Uganda, the Owiny and Omolo groups, had traded with Nyamwezi in among other things, beads and gerhis (cowries). Thus, when they entered Western Kenya, they brought with them spears, drums, stools, beads and gerhis (Luo: *gagi*). It is apparent that *gagi* was not known among the people the Luo found in Western Kenya so that when the Luo reverted to using them for divinations, the clients believed their words. This should not be surprising because even in our own time when a mirror and later the radio were introduced, many medicine men used them for divination (Levy: OI: 2017).

When they settled on their conquered land units, trade persisted. Hoe blades from Samia are still famous all over Luo land. Through such trade, the Nilotic Luo interacted with their Bantu neighbors which led to reciprocal borrowing of cultural ideas and technologies. In the course of their trek, the Luo were led by *Ruoth Oganda* (leader of the sub-tribe), whose role was more of a coordinator between the *thuond lweny* (warriors), *jobilo* (medicine men and diviner) and

members of the *oganda* (subtribe). Prof. Ochieng records that: -

The Nilotic Luo imported into Nyanza such political ideas. When they arrived in Nyanza and settled among the previous Bantu occupants of the Lake Region, the various Luo ruoths (ruodhi) tended to accept the positions of existing Bantu clan elders whom they confirmed in their traditional functions. Junior elders were created to assist clan leaders and each clan was required to keep a peace-making force (Ochieng, 1974).

The creation of office of junior elders that Ochieng<sup>7</sup> suggests seems to be a later development. The office of *Jabilo* (diviner and medicine man) was an important position next to that of *ruoth oganda* in the traditional Luo political hierarchy. *Jabilo* was the principal chief advisor to *ruoth oganda* (Ochieng, 1974). Apart from trade, the Luo fought battles among themselves and with their neighbors. Most of these battles were as a result of cattle raids. The battle with the Luhya occurred (Mayor, 1957) in Bunyore (near Maseno and Luanda), in Musanda (Kenneth *et al.*, 1971) and in Usonga. The people captured in the battle area became *wasumbni* (Luhya: Abasumba) (Were, 1967).

The people who raided the Luhya frequently were the Uasin Gishu Maasais who used to be called Abakwaba by the Luhya but are nowadays referred to as Abaseebe. Osogo (1971) notes that: -

It seems that the strange type of secret cult in Baluhya called emiseebe (Luo: sepe) originates from these people. For the Abaluhya who became Abaseebe (Luos: Josepe) tend to behave like the ancient Maasai and speak a strange dialect.

It seems that through social interactions between the Luo and the Luhya, the *sepe* cult found its way into Luo land. Though it is difficult to reconstruct exactly what the Luos borrowed from Luhya in Western Kenya, they themselves having arrived as an already mixed group, it is nonetheless certain that it was during the period of infiltration and expansion that there was marked cultural interaction in the Lake Victoria Region of Yimbo. As Jok and Owin groups arrived, the Luo expanded their boundaries from the area of Ramogi Hill to the interior where they contacted Kombekombe, a Bantu-speaking community, believed to have Gusii origin. Further to the interior, they came into contact with Mori, Uwaria, and Nyang<sup>8</sup>ori in the area now known as Asembo.

The names the Luo and Luhya used to refer to God, were Nyasaye and Were respectively. They believed in a Supreme Being before they came to Kenya as indicated by Wagner (1970) and Were (1974).

The history of cultural interaction in this area goes back to at least the last millennium B.C during which time the Rift Southern Cushitic speakers had spread to Western Kenya and beyond into Northern and Central Tanzania, as well as, into the South Western side of Lake Victoria. At the base of people's lives, lay the concept of God, referred to as the sun. The linking of the sun and God continue to this day among

the Iraqw, Luhya, Kalenjin, and Luo societies. Additionally, both the Luo and Luhya have myths associated with the sun set in the West. Both report that, to quote the Luhya account:-

At night, the sun is believed to travel back from the West to East, though across the sky but underneath the earth... A story relates, however, that once a man woke up in his hut at night and went outside his hut to urinate. There he saw the sun quickly speeding across the sky back to the East, a most in a specious experience, which necessitated an elaborate rite of illustration. (Wagner 1970)

Both the Luo and the Luhya pray to God every morning and evening spitting at the sun invoking the sun to rise well so that peace may prevail in the day and that misfortune should set with the sun to the West. Without making categorical claims, it can be tentatively put forward that since the subsequent migrations, settlement of the majority into the Rift and Western Kenya, people trans- versed the land formerly occupied by the Rift Southern Cushitic peoples. The ideas about God, and the sun held by these earlier people could have found their way into the newer societies.

While the Luo call the West as *Yimbo*, the Luhya talk of Ebumumbo. It is noteworthy that the cult of Mumbo, which was believed to be a Luo cult was associated with a huge snake, which lived in Lake Victoria, which for the Luo is situated in the West. The spirit of Mumbo was originally not a water spirit but the Luo came along with it. The concept Mumbo found its way into the Luo world-view from the Luhya or other Bantu people (Professor Ochieng: oi: 2013).

During sacrifices, both the Luo and the Luhya profess *misango* (Luhya emisango) and *luswa* meaning the act of sacrifice. This can only be explained in terms of reciprocal borrowing between the Nilotic Luo and the Bantu Luhya. In the same vein, interaction manifests in such words like *osuri* (Luhya sususli), which is the stick on the top-most part of the roofs of traditional huts, holding the thatch intact. Among the Luo, this symbolized authority and had to be pulled down from all the huts of the wives whose husband had died before they could be re-married (tero or lago) by a cousin of the dead man (Ogot, 1967). The same stick was a symbol of headship among many Luhya communities.

While many similar words could be cited from various aspects of Luo and Luhya languages, the Luo and Luhya had a lot in common as far as their cultural beliefs and practices, including belief in the Supreme Being, were concerned during pre-colonial times. Among those of them who live close to the Lake, spirit possession was and continues to be a common cult. Spirits like those of Sumba and Adongo Nundu spread right from Samia Bugwe in Uganda to Samia, Bukhaya and Bunyala among the Luhya; and in Ugenya, Alego, Yimbo, Sakwa and Uyoma, to mention only a few localities among the Luo. Rainmaking, which many informants believed was a Bantu practice, was adopted by Luo people when they came to Western Kenya. The Luo and Luhya, as many other African people believed

in spirits and spiritual world even before they came into contact with one another.

Under the circumstances, the Luo and Luhya found themselves in when they settled in Western Kenya, every notable feature of the world around them, natural or cultural influence which affected their lives such as storms or diseases, or every trouble which they encountered had spiritual connotations. With time, people evolved and developed identical skills, techniques, customs, norms, values and taboos alongside inherent belief in spirits compounded with profound convictions in the continued existence of the departed or ancestors.

The Luos and those who were assimilated were prone, therefore, to either use of the same word to express ideas or different words to express the same idea. This tendency is particularly noticeable among the inhabitants of Yimbo, Alego, Ugenya, Samia, Bukhaya, Marachi, Gem, Sakwa, Asembo and Uyoma.

Ogot states that:-

It would appear that the migration of Luhya group that settled in Southern Busoga to Kenya took place about ten generations ago, and therefore c. 1652-1679. Included in this cluster were such well-known Luhya people of Abafofoyo of Marachi, Abakhayo, Abatirichi, Abakhekhe, Abamarama, Abakabras, Abanyole and Maragoli. The majority of these people occupied their present homes from the present Luo district of Central Nyanza (Ogot, 1967).

If the suggested date (c. 1652-1679) was correct, it would mean that the mentioned Luhya peoples, came after Luo had arrived in the area. However, the early history of Eastern Uganda and Western Kenya via Yimbo is very closely associated with Bantu migrations from general areas of Western Uganda and Mount Elgon (Ochieng, 1974).

The traditional history of many of the Ganda, Soga and Gwe clans open with the migrations from either of the two areas. The same is true of the traditions of a large number of the Abaluhya sub-tribal groups or which moved into Western Kenya from Eastern Uganda that is from the area between Mount Elgon and Lake Victoria (Were, 1967. Ochieng, 1967). Together with other Bantu groups, these Abaluhya clans and tribes appear to have been among the most anciently settled of the Bantu-speaking people in the Lake Region. It is reasonable to infer that while other Bantu people moved away westwards and Southwards from the focal point to find new polities, the Abaluhya remained in the region for some time after splinter moves.

The inhabitants of Samia are reported (Were, 1967) to have come from Misri, trekked through Mukono (Uganda), Sigulu Island, Rwambwa to the present Samia. The major clans of Marachi came from Bunyoro, through Buganda, Busoga, Bunyala, and Ugenya on to the present Marachi. Major Bukhaya clans claim origin from Ibanda in Busoga. Banyala on the other hand, is made up of mixed origin. Of further interest to this study is the fact that majority of the present Abaluhya clans originally migrated to their present

territories from the present Luoland, some leaving behind remnants of their people along low-lying plains of Lake Victoria. Some like Idakho and Isukha had settled in the present Luo country before they moved northwards into their present settlements into Buluhya. Others like Abanyole still remember their earlier wandering in Yimbo, Sakwa, Asembo and Gem before they finally settled in their present territories. The entry points in Nyanza were generally at the present day Samia, Yimbo and Alego (Ogot, 1967). It remains to be stated that these late arrivals, the Luhya and the Luo, were exposed to a completely new environment, and experienced almost the same fascinations. This phenomenon directed the development of their cultural beliefs and practices.

The Luo in their migratory mode of life were under the guidance of God and spiritual agencies possessed of mind and will. By the time, they got into Nyanza, they had spent nearly a century of migratory mode of life. Their concept of molder deity had developed from Jok who protected the homestead (Okot P'Bitek, 1971) to Nyakalaga who led them to the new land (Ogot 1967).

Previous work on the Luhya cultural beliefs and practices include that of Wagner (1970). Like their Luo neighbors, the Luhya believed in a Supreme Being whom they variously referred to as Were, Nyasaye, or Nasaye. The Supreme Being was believed to be their creator and the ultimate object of worship. As was the case with the Luo and other African societies, the acts of worship were directed to God through spirits or ancestors who acted as intermediaries.

The power and role of ancestral spirits was an important aspect of the cultural beliefs of the Luhya people. The departed whom they called *abafwa* or *ebishieno* were believed to continue in existence and their spirits communicated with the living in dreams or hallucinations, as good or bad spirits. Depending on their character, the spirits could cause good luck to the living relatives in matters related to health, crops, livestock, procreation, general success and prosperity or alternatively, disease, disaster and bad luck in all spheres of life.

The arrival of these Nilotic people brought with it an enrichment of symbol and ritual. The Luos brought with them their spears and drums, which were symbols of authority and this is with reference to the Drum and Spear which were carried by Dimo, Munyejra and Owil while going to establish a home (Kadimo Chiefdom). They were good hunters but they never hunted carnivorous animals for food.

The people we found here were eating anything.

Leopards made good meat for them. Moreover, even now some of the Luhya people still eat leopards (Nekesa: oi: 2017).

The Luo hunted leopards for their skins. It would appear, therefore, that the feeling of impurity after one killed a leopard would lead to purification, a practice now common among people of Western Kenya, was Nilotic in origin. The Luhya are also known to have had ceremonies for the slayers of such animals but only because they were great and

had killed a great enemy.

Along the Lakeshore, the spirit cults were fully entrenched. After a few generations of staying together and inter-marriage between the Luo and Luhya, the Luo added to their ancestral spirits such spirits as Sumba and Mumbo (Osogo, 1967). These spirits were associated with the Lake, could not have been brought by the Luo. The same applies to boat cults. The boat spirits (Juok yie) have remained a mystery among the fishing Luo communities. The boat was regarded as spirit possessed. They said *yie en migogo* meaning the boat was a married daughter. Migogo is a Bantu word (Luhya omukoko). The most important part of the boat is *Mgongo* (keel), a word which sounds like *migogo*. The Luo can be heard saying that *yien en mgongo* meaning that once you have your kill you have your boat. Nevertheless, here is a word that was borrowed through interactions between the early Luo and Luhya peoples within Yimbo territory.

The sophisticated Luo rituals connected with making of a new home (ligala) are also a reflection of the later beliefs (Mboya, 1967). It is unbelievable that a semi-nomadic people like the Luo could have brought to the sedentary Bantu populations such cultural practices as ownership of land, giving the one who was going to make a new home fire (kwanyo mach) and stepping on the site of the new homestead (nyono lowo). What seems probable is that the Bantu gave the Luo these practices and beliefs before the Luo settled down on land. These have, however, remained the practices among the Luo who until very recently did not have attachment to land. On the other hand, the traditional Luo word for homestead was *pacho* and the husband who was the head of the homestead was *wuon pacho*. Because of these interactions, the most common word for homestead among the contemporary Luo became *dala*, which apparently is of Bantu origin (Luhya *lidala*). Its reasonable, therefore, that some of the Luo rituals associated with establishing a new homestead came later after they had settled in Western Kenya.

The Luo myths, riddles and proverbs are in many ways similar to the Luhya ones, which can be explained in terms of cultural interactions. The argument being advanced here is that before the colonial period, the Luo and their Luhya neighbors had interacted so much that it became difficult to treat the contemporary Luo and Luhya distinctly. When people who possess different cultures meet and live together for a long time, it will be very unlikely that the culture they possess after their long contact shall ever be the same again.

By the time Joka Owiny, for example, got to Western Kenya (Alego and extended to Yimbo), they had spent nearly half a century of only temporary settled life. Thus, when they started settling down, their responses to the new environment were bound to be different from the response they had in their previous locales. Their idea of molder deity had changed from Jok who protected the homestead to *Nyakalaga* (the one found everywhere), who guided and protected his people wherever they were. *Nyakalaga* was constantly appealed to in case of difficulties.

The name *Nyasaye* whether it was coined from the verb *sayo* or was borrowed and it became common after the Luo settled in Nyanza, probably in the first half of 17<sup>th</sup> century. If they had developed the name in the course of their trek, then the name should have been common among the Padhola as well. As far as the evidence available indicates the Padhola use the name *Were* for Supreme Being. Since the Luo of Kenya also use the *Were*, it seems that the term *Were* was developed amongst these Nilotic people before the term *Nyasaye* was adopted, and it may have been borrowed from the Bantu. The name *Nyasaye* came to use in the first half of 17<sup>th</sup> century. The word *Nyasaye* was derived from the verb *sayo*. It is noteworthy that the letter *a* does not exist in the alphabet of the Acholi among whom Okot worked, and so they did not have any knowledge of these words. However, this study do not ascribe to Okot's argument that the Luo borrowed the term *Nyasaye* from the Luhya. This would be tantamount to arguing that since the Acholi do not have letters *f*, *h* and *s*, which the Luo of Kenya have in their alphabet, then all the words with those letters were borrowed.

Sacrifices and pouring of libations were minimized as the Luo traversed foreign lands. Ceremonies and rituals involving the community were restricted to private rituals as their shrines and places where family cultural ceremonies were carried out had been left behind.

In the course of the trek, however, three places became important and sacred. These were: - *Kar jot* meaning a place of stop but more so a place where the clan elder lit his first fire on a strange land; *kar hanga*, meaning some raised ground where the men camped while the women and children remained with their animals on the lower grounds, and later, *Pap guok*, meaning a place where a dog was cut into two halves to mark the boundary between the feuding groups of people. Some of the huge rocks, caves, hills, groves and even woods they found fascinating acquired some cultural status or values and were later used as shrines. The spear (tong" widhi) of the group leader became a very important cultural object just as the prophet or sooth-sawyer (Jabilo) became a very important cultural person. Through the contacts, technical skills, cultural beliefs and art forms were transmitted from one ethnic group to another. Four examples, namely, sun as a manifestation of God, attitude towards ancestors, rainmaking and fishing are further explained below.

The Luo also equated God with *Chieng*. The sun (Wang Chieng") was treated with respect and awe. A survey of previous studies of other Luo speaking peoples reveal that the sun does not feature prominently among these Nilotic people. However, to the Luo of Kenya, the sun was most important single object of awe.

Ehret (1974) argues that: -

Rift communities spread, over the course of the last millennium B.C., from Western and central Kenya into Northern and central Tanzania and apparently as far West as the South West side of the Lake Victoria. Hence, ideas current among early Rift people can be

expected to have had important consequences in the wide range of later East African societies.

In the last millennium B.C. there was already in existence a concept of a high God, referred to with the same word as that which was used for the sun. The linking of the sun and God by the use of the same name still persists among the modern Iraqw of West Rift sub-group.

The Southern Nilotic borrowed of a Southern Cushitic term for the sun, and its use for both the sun and God, shows that some semantic linkage occurred among the ancient plateau Rift people of Western and central Kenya about 2,000 years ago. The conceptualization of sun as God did not imply that the sun was God but was rather a figurative linking of the high God with one of the primal forces of the natural environment (Ehret, 1974). Sherter (1974), on the other hand, contends that Sun symbolism and use of sun-names for the Supreme Being are such a common place in the religions of the world that the linguistic phenomenon cannot be regarded as significant without the support of further cultural and historical facts (Sherter, 1974).

The Luo having settled down as a mixed agricultural economy involving both pastoral farming and crop production, in an area where the use of the sun as a name for God was in existence, were also influenced and adopted the practice. Like their neighbors, they looked at the sun as manifesting God though they did not regard it as God. Because their new agricultural economy depended on rain from the sky, they developed a cosmology polarized around the sky centered on the sun, which they regarded as, the eye of God' (Wang' Chieng').

Between the Northern and central Luo, it seems that the immediate element of cultural activity was God (spirit) called Nhialic, Kwoth and Jok by the Shilluk, Nuer and Central Luo respectively. Among the Kenya Luo, on the other hand, the ancestral spirits seemed to predominate. By around 1000 A.D, some Bantu groups had already settled around Lake Victoria basin. The cultural ideas of these people were nurtured by the environment where they settled. The cultural practices and beliefs were reflected on the basic problems of the region, namely disease, social order, family and clan solidarity. As a result, the cultural practices and beliefs among the early Bantu centered on the ancestral spirits. The evolution of their ideas, therefore, was in many ways similar to those of late arrivals into the area, especially the Luo, who were also exposed to the same environment.

The ancestral spirits influenced the daily life of the Bantus, thus linked the community's past with the individual's existence for posterity. The Luo-speakers, likewise, after their many wanderings from the cradleland, settled down to a permanent lifestyle and shifted their focus away from the mobile God who was found everywhere (Nyakalaga) to the ancestral spirits who dealt with their immediate challenges such as diseases, famine and barrenness. This kind of evolution was evident among the Padhola and increasingly among the Luo of Kenya.

According to Luo traditions, they practiced the art of rainmaking prior to their arrival and settlement in Western

Kenya. The majority of the informants believed that the Luo found the Bantu-speaking people with the art of rain-making. The Luo did not make rains originally. The few who are reported to have been rainmakers were either personally related to the Lunde of Bunyore or at least borrowed the art of rain medicine from the Lunde. Luo prophets and medicine men could only inform the people whether there was going to be rain and what could be done (look for rainmakers) in case there was acute drought. This practice was a result of contact with the Bantu and change of environment, namely, the shifting nature of economic pursuit from a pastoral to an agricultural economy.

The innovations that were direct consequence of the fishing industry were also important. Among the Luo, there is a belief that their ancestors followed the Nile and that they were fishermen before they arrived in Western Kenya. This hypothesis is not logical in regard to all the three waves of the Luo migrations into Western Kenya. It is true that some of the Luo (Joka Omolo) closely followed the Nile as far as their Pawir settlement was concerned, but it is possible to know that they were just using the river for watering their animals. It is also not clear how long these semi-nomadic people were in Pawir and their economic activities. The argument being advanced here is that since Joka Jok and Joka Owiny hardly had any contact with the Nile while Joka Omolo seem to have been close to the Nile and Lake Kyoga for only short periods, it was, therefore until the Luo came into Western Kenya that they became fishermen. In other words, the fishing industry was an innovation resulting from the change in their environment and the influence of alien people whom they came into contact with such as the Bantu-speakers.

Paul Mboya has devoted an entire chapter to Luo fishing activity (Mboya, 1967). The word he uses for the act of fishing is *lupo*. The noun *lupo* is derived from the verb *luwo* which means „to follow’’ or go on the trail of something. The term is hunting a term, which does not apply to fishing but only to animals. The proper term for the act of fishing is *newo*, which was borrowed from Bantu term known as *okhunawa*. From discussions with local fishermen along the Lake in Yimbo, it was apparent that the Luo had no word for the process of fishing, which implies that they were not fishermen before their arrival into Western Kenya.

Osogo (1967) infers that, the most common traps for fish were kwira (Luhya - olukhwira), migono (Luhya - omukono), and olalo (Luhya - obulalo) to mention a few. The Luo in addition to borrowing the term for the industry, also borrowed the terms for the tools. The same applies to names of some of the most popular fish. Names of fish like ngege (Luhya - ingeke), ningu (Luhya- iningu), sire (Luhya - isire), and monye (Luhya- imonye) appear to have been borrowed from Luhya. It could also be argued that the Luhya borrowed the terms from the Luo. However, the fact that the other Luo speakers do not use the same terms invalidates this argument.

Finally, the Luo having become fishermen around Lake Victoria, adopted water spirit cults (juok nam). To them,

fishing became a cultural activity centered on fishing vessels (yie). A fishing boat was named after a country, a famous person, a married daughter (migogo) or a grandparent. Whoever the choice was, his or her spirit (juogi) would seize the boat and control it. From then on, the boat was no longer an object but a spiritual personality.

## 8. Conclusions

The history of cultural interaction in this area goes back to at least the last millennium B.C during which time the Rift Southern Cushitic speakers had spread to Western Kenya and beyond into Northern and Central Tanzania, as well as, into the South Western side of Lake Victoria. With time, through cultural and ethnic group interactions, people evolved and developed identical skills, techniques, customs, norms, values and taboos alongside inherent belief in spirits compounded with profound convictions in the continued existence of the departed or ancestors. Many similar words could be cited from various aspects of Luo and Luhya languages. The Luo and Luhya had a lot in common as far as their cultural beliefs and practices are concerned, including belief in the Supreme Being, during pre-colonial times. Through such trade, the Nilotic Luo interacted with their Bantu neighbors which led to reciprocal borrowing of cultural ideas and technologies. The Luhya were frequently raided by the Uasin Gishu Maasais who used to be called Abakwaba. The Luos and other groups who were assimilated were prone, therefore, to either use of the same word to express ideas or different words to express the same idea. This tendency is particularly noticeable among the inhabitants of Yimbo, Alego, Ugenya, Samia, Bukhayo, Marachi, Gem, Sakwa, Asembo and Uyoma.

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