

# The Origin, Migration and Settlement of Ethnic Groups in Yimbo of Western Kenya from 1800-1895

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**Abstract** Yimbo was the entry point into Nyanza and Western Kenya regions for many ethnic groups. Previous studies dealt with the migratory trends of major linguistic and ethnic affiliations in Kenya while very few or limited studies have been directed towards minority ethnic groups such as those in Yimbo region of Western Kenya. The study was carried out to investigate the origin, migration and settlement of communities in Yimbo from 1800-1895. The study was conducted in Yimbo region of western Kenya. The work used Social Interaction Theory to interpret and explain the findings of the study. Non-probability sampling method was used to collect data, in this case purposive and snowball methods of sampling were employed. Methods of data collection included oral interviews, focus group discussions and archival sources. Secondary data sources were also used. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. The findings revealed that various ethnic groups came from various parts of Africa and entered Yimbo region, as an entry point or transit region for further migration into the greater East African region while other ethnic groups remained in small groups in Yimbo.

**Keywords** Yimbo, Origin, Migration, Settlement, Communities, Social interaction, Ethnic groups

## 1. Introduction

The historical trajectory of socio-economic and political transformation of Yimbo community in Siaya county, Kenya, begins as early 1800 when different communities settled in the region and social formations in terms of clans began to manifest. Inter-community relations in Yimbo during the colonial period later transformed systematically the patterns of inter-ethnic and inter-clan relations leading to the emergence of ethnic and clan cleavages and latent conflicts in the independence and post-independence periods.

This trajectory therefore leads to an analysis of the place of Yimbo in Kenya's politics of decolonization by demonstrating their contribution to the emergence and development of nationalism. Using the pre-colonial institutions as benchmarks, the transformation of socio-economic practices and the growth of political consciousness among the people of Yimbo can be well understood in light of changes in their historical conditions postured by the colonial and post-colonial political economy.

### 1.1. Research Context

The search for clan identity has been a complex discourse in regard to the history of clan formations in Yimbo where

different ethnic groups first settled in Nyanza. The individual's identity has been crucial in terms of structuring of power and authority in the region. This situation has inspired simultaneous invention of competing majority (*Kadimo*) and minority (*Ojwando*) clans. In this case, *Ojwando* is a pejorative reference to strangers in Yimbo history while *Kadimo* is the Luo clan. The competing *Kadimo* and *Ojwando* versions of history in Yimbo influenced the partition of the location, and an ongoing competition at the level of education and other development programs between the *Dimo* and *Ojwando* clans (Ayany, 1987).

Among the issues which arise here is the subtle enmeshing of ideology, identity, and material concerns. In Yimbo kinship values are not decaying in the context of changing communities. Rather are being reworked and reinforced in ways in which identity takes the form of economic materialism within the sub-location, where inequalities, differential access to opportunities, are attributed to social categories and identities which have been substantially invented (Ogot, 2006).

Another issue that arises has to do with the uses of history. The invention of sub-locations has involved the inventions of sub-locational history. The legal processes of land adjudication and titling in Siaya have involved the reenactment of family and lineage histories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and perhaps from even earlier. In land litigation one's identity is probed both *Patri* lineally and *matrilineally*. In the process history explodes and the one who was an

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uncle today is reconstituted as an outsider with no patrimony because his ancestors were sired by a bantu alien (Ndeda, 2019). These historical concerns have influenced the historical trajectory of Yimbo over time and needs to be analyzed.

### 1.2. Problem Statement

It has been deduced that Yimbo was the entry point into Nyanza and Western Kenya for many ethnic groups, thus the naming of Yimbo has been controversial right from its founding. Initially inhabited by small Bantu tribes before the arrival of Ramogi III, the emigration of the first Cohort of the Luo to Southern Nyanza through the Lake saw a glaring gap in the area. Many Bantu clans came to reside there, including the Walwanga, the Wareje, the banyala (Jo mwalo), the Walowa, the Wagoma, among others.

This social matrix created a complex political and social arrangement with some clans in Yimbo being marginalized due to their social identity and often pejoratively referred to as 'strangers' by the dominant clans. These inconsistencies were not critically examined by pioneer scholars on this subject of migration and settlement history, because their analysis was limited to the general migratory patterns of the Luhya and Luo into Yimbo upto 1800.

It also appears that they understood the Luo and the Luo in Yimbo as homogeneous communities without underscoring the intra ethnic diversities and their related impacts on socio-economic and political transformation in the region. This new paradigm needs to be critically examined in order to reconstruct the historical trajectory vis a vis the historical details that had been presented by pioneer scholars on this subject.

### 1.3. Objective of the Study

To investigate the origin, migration and settlement of ethnic groups in Yimbo of Western Kenya from 1800-1895.

### 1.4. Literature Review

Human migration refers to movement of people from one place to another with the intention of settling temporarily or permanently in the new location. It may involve movements over short or long distances and from one country or region to another. Migrations begun with *Homo erectus* out of Africa across Eurasia about 1.75 million years ago (Groenveld, 2016). Other notable population movements included the Neolithic Revolution, Indo-European expansion, Early Medieval Great Migrations and the Turki expansion (Groenveld, 2016).

More recent migrations and settlement were the Bantu, Nilotic and Cushitic migrations throughout Africa (Gugliotta, 2008). Nilotic migrations took place from the northern part of Africa to the West African and East African Region and to the Far East. The southward Bantu migration took place in Sub-Saharan Africa over 2000 years ago. Their spread was enhanced by the development of iron working, leading to spread of agriculture and increase in population movement in

search of land for settlement and agriculture. Causes of their movement included population increase, introduction of new crops such as bananas, allowing for efficient food production and the need for adventure (Gugliotta, 2008).

The early inhabitants of Western Kenya are believed to have been hunters-and-gatherers just as the Khoisan and Southern Cushitic peoples. Ochieng (1974) asserts that the Bantu, Southern Cushites and Nilotes followed the Khoisan. However, after many years of interaction with the new comers, the Khoisan were either assimilated by the invaders or forced to migrate to other areas. The intermarriage between the Khoisan, Southern Cushitic communities, Bantu and Nilotes led to the emergence of new societies and languages as witnessed in Yimbo.

Luo migration into Western Kenya can be traced from Southern Sudan, usually referred to as Misri through Uganda into Kenya, and extended to Tanzania (Ogot, 1967). From Uganda, the Luo arrived in Kenya in four different waves between 1650 and 1750. Their migration was sparked off by a multiplicity of causes, some of which were natural, while others were human initiated. Natural causes of human migrations included pestilence, diseases, floods, and droughts, such as, the spread of the Sahara Desert and pest infestations. Human-made factors included witchcraft, power struggles, theft and greed, vengeance or fear of enemies (Ogot, 1967).

Before their entry into Yimbo between there was the Bantu wave from Eastern Uganda into Western Kenya. Thus, the arrival of the Luo created competition for land and water. But over time, the different communities adopted the culture of other groups and influenced their customs (Ochieng, 1974). Therefore, the Luo of Yimbo are not merely the descendants of the migrants from Southern Sudan, but also of other ethnic groups whom they came into contact with since their historic migration. Similarly, the Abaluhya in Yimbo are not merely the descendants of the early Bantu settlers of Western Province and Nyanza, but also of Bantu from neighbouring Eastern and Southern Uganda, Kalenjin and Maasai speaking immigrants, Luo, and Iteso (Were, 1967).

Osogo (1967) therefore contends that in the process of migration and settlement of ethnic groups in Yimbo, there was integration of indelible and dispensable cultural characteristics. Indelible cultural characteristics were those they carried with them wherever they went, and the dispensable ones usually belonged to their previous tribal groups, which they discarded as need arose or as they got assimilated into a new tribal outfit. Among this optional heritage were languages distinguishing tribal marks, and customs other than those of birth, religion, burial and clan names.

#### 1.4.1. Research Gap and Justification

Literature in this section has simply demonstrated the trajectory of migration patterns and settlement in Kenya and Lake Victoria basin and identifying the Bantu to have

pioneered the settlement of the region before the Nilotic Luo. However, details of interaction between the two groups and the subsequent emergence and systemic segregation of the Bantu clans has not been illuminated. The different forms of identities leading to the treatment of minorities has not been discussed, thus the need for this research to illuminate the characteristic dichotomies between the minority bantu clans and the majority Luo groups in Yimbo.

### 1.5. Theoretical Framework

The Social Interaction Theory was developed by a German Social Scientist, Max Weber, who explained that social behavior has two components, namely, the action or the behavior itself and, the meaning the actor attaches to his or her behavior, (referred to as orientation). It is how a person perceives his behavior in relation to other people and that it is that knowledge of how the other person is affected that makes an action or interaction a social phenomenon (Herbert, 1969). This concept was further developed by the German-American, Kurt Levin, who developed the concept of group dynamics. He was concerned with the interaction not just between individuals and the groups that they belong to. His main contribution of group dynamics is that human behavior results from the interaction between a person and his environment. He wrote this theory as a mathematical equation, making behavior equal to the function of individuals and the environment (Herbert, 1969). Scholars such as Holsti (1969) and Herbert (1969), have contributed to the theory by analyzing the way in which people learn to interpret and give meaning to the world through their interactions with others. Social Interaction Theory assumes that interaction is influenced by a number of factors, namely, physical, linguistic, cognitive and social (Cooter and Reutzell, 2004).

### 1.6. 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 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. Non-probability sampling method was used to collect data, meaning purposive method of sampling was employed. In purposive sampling, the researcher deliberately targets a group of people believed to be reliable for the study. The power of this sampling method lies in selecting information rich cases for in-depth analysis related to the central issues being studied. Interviewing of individual respondents was undertaken to collect relevant information. Focus group discussion was done, where groups 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 study gathered relevant primary data from archival records at the national archives, university libraries, and national libraries. An archive is an accumulation of historical records or the physical place they are located. Archives contain primary source documents that have accumulated over the course of an individual or organization's lifetime, and are kept to show the function of that person or organization. Archival records are normally unpublished and usually unique, unlike books or magazines for which many identical copies exist.

### 1.7. Study Findings

The vast area of Yimbo underwent a tremendous transformation because various ethnic groups that had diverse cultures, language, modes of dressing as well as eating habits, inhabited it. In the process of migration that later compelled them to call for sedentary life, the communities had to integrate politically, socially and economically. Yimbo was initially Bantunized, especially by the Abalogoli and Abagusii. It was a place of sojourn for the two major Luo clusters, namely Joka-Jok and Joka-Owiny. Yimbo is a directional point in Luo, which means West (Yimbo). The other directions also have local names as East (Ugwe), North (Nyandwat), Central (Masawa) and South (Milambo). The sun rises from the East and sets in the West and, therefore, Yimbo is a directional point (West) where the sun sets. Both Bantu and Nilotic ethnic groups integrated to form one society in terms of culture and language of which some ethnic groups were either assimilated or became extinct in the area.

#### 1.7.1. Ethnic Occupation in Yimbo

Before the arrival of Luos in Yimbo, several ethnic groups were scattered in the area, but each was independent of the other. They had distinct political units, running their own internal affairs and external relations. Their social and political organizations were simple, but because they lived near one another and practiced inter-marriage, within a short time, their social and political systems tended to become uniform.

Ethnic groups had external relations with their neighbours and they cooperated in matters such as rain making, defence against external aggression, marriage laws and diplomatic alliances (Ochieng, 1975). Some ethnic groups arrived from Lake Victoria while others arrived from the mainland via Uganda.

Since clans tended to specialize in certain crafts, e.g. the Goma in pottery, Wawamba in rain making, Wasimira in witchcraft, Abasamia and later Walowa in iron-making, there developed a need to interact and co-exist for exchange of such goods and services. Ideas were easily exchanged which shaped their social orientation, like traditional concepts and laws, tended to render them similar in terms of

governance (Ochieng, 1975).

Some of the Bantu groups came from Islands in Lake Victoria, like Mageta, Lolwe, Siro, Hama, Wayasi and Sagiti. Nonetheless, a large number of them followed mainland routes from Tanzania and Uganda sections of Lake Victoria Basin. Most of the Bantu clans that are now found in the present Western Kenya once lived in Yimbo, but fled when the first wave of Luo invasion arrived in the neighborhood.

#### 1.7.2. Cultural Assimilation of Bantu Groups and Clan Formations in Yimbo

The assimilation process between Bantu and Nilotic communities in Yimbo was first marked by acculturation. Through interaction, after a period of time, social and cultural change stemmed from the balancing of Bantu and Luo cultures but eventually the Luo culture was adapted as the prevailing culture in Yimbo society. The Bantu clans that remained in Yimbo after the dispersal major Bantu and nilotic communities from Yimbo- Abaluhya, Abagusi and the Maragoli and the Kalenjin, some Bantu clans remained as isolated communities and continued to co-exist with the Luo clans in Yimbo eventually acquiring and adjusting to a new cultural environment. Among the Bantu clans that were assimilated are the Abanyole. Were (as cited in Lonsdale, 1968) observes thus, 'In the case of Abanyole their ancestors lived off from the Banyole of Eastern Uganda, and wandered onto Kadimo (Yimbo), Sakwa, Bondo and Akala Gem, before finally settling in their present territory of Bunyore. This cluster also included the Aberechenya and Abanyulia.

Wahumadhi (Abahumadhi) is one of the Abaluhya that remained in Yimbo after the major dispersal by Luo inversion. This clan has maintained their original luhyia language to date and only speak *Dholuo* as their second language (Levy: oi: 2019). Wahumadhi travelled by water from Southern and Central Uganda encountering heavy stormy wind over the Lake, as they used their canoes made of trunk trees. They were accompanied by the Bahenye who also retained their culture and language. The Bahenye essentially ascribed to the Luhya ethnic group (Opala: oi: 2018).

The Wasenge are Bantu speakers who migrated to Yimbo from the Ukerewe Island of Lake Victoria and later moved on to Kamsengre. They were known as hippo hunters besides being good fishermen. After exhausting the hippos, some sailed inland to settle in Sakwa and are today identified as Kamayuje clan. Later dispersal saw them disintegrate and migrate to Alego Ulafulu, acquiring the name Walafu (Ochieng', 1975).

Walowa people were originally Bantu speakers who sailed from Uganda to eventually settle on Buvuma Islands in Lake Victoria where they engaged in fishing. In Uganda, they were initially known as Abalalo. From Buvuma, they settled on Mageta Island. From Mageta, they divided themselves into three groups with one group remaining at Mageta Island while the rest sailed to the mainland. The group that migrated to Sakwa area further divided into two sub-groups, one of which went to Alego while the rest sailed to Rusinga Island.

A splinter group went to the mainland in South Nyanza upto Kadem. They later migrated to North Mara in Tanzania, finally settling at Rieny where they are today known as Abaturi. The other group that landed on the mainland first settled at *Wadh Walowa* at Kanyibok in Yimbo where they were captured by Kadimo and released on the realization that they could manufacture arms for war (blacksmiths). During their movements, they were led by Ndalo Mufuma (or of Buvuma).

Having won the friendship and confidence of Kadimo, Ndalo Mufuma pleaded for land. As a good gesture, the Kadimo gave them land in Ulowa. The offer was made on condition that the weapons manufactured by Walowa would not be sold to the enemies of Kadimo clan. Other members of Walowa were settled at Ureje beyond Lake Sare. The Walowa who went to Rusinga Island from Yimbo, accompanied by Kamasengere, went to help the Wanyama and Waware defeat their enemies. When the enemies had been defeated (driven out of the Island), the Walowa elder, Koho, and his son, Khaemba, settled in Mfangano Island among the Wagimbe. The rest proceeded to the mainland until they arrived at North Mara in Tanzania.

Although Koho was the founding father of Walowa on Mfangano Island, his son (Khaemba) became more popular than his father's. The Walowa continued to make sacrifices at Khaemba's shrines but not his father's. Koho arrived at Mfangano Island when he was too old so that Khaemba took charge of the family and went ahead to become a famous leader.

Today, the Walowa are found between the Wakula and Waware of Mfangano Island. Their number remained small, probably because they did not want to reveal the secrets of their blacksmith trade to other people. They made and supplied arrows, spears and knives to every ethnic group on the Island. Therefore, they had no need to form an alliance with any other group. In so doing, they avoided inter-marriage and remained few in numbers, although they claimed to have been depopulated by sleeping sickness which was frequent on Mfangano Island. The communities that constituted Western Kenya and Yimbo peacefully co-existed alongside each other from pre-colonial times engaging in trading, inter-marriage, attending ceremonies and dances together despite occasional disputes (Ayumba, 2012).

Other Bantu communities remained in Mageta Island who included the Abamunje, Abamanzaba, Abamuswa, Abaimi, Ababoko, Abahunja, Ababemba, Abasawa, Ababu and Ababulu. Sometimes later, majority of these ethnic groups sailed to the mainland to join other Bantu groups who remained on the mainland like the Abenge, Abaludhi, Abakholo, Abawanga, Abatsipi, Abagero, Abakhweri, Abalusera and Abakhala. Together, occupied the area stretching from Kadimo bay to Nagoba in Bunyala.

Mageta Island attracted immigrants from different directions. Nilotic Luo continued to infiltrate the Island leading to adoption of Luo language and customs by the Bantu clans that occupied the Island. But successive waves

of Bantu invasions from Southern Buganda, Busoga and Tanzania later added to the population of the Island that then acquired its name from the immigrants from Tanzania where there is Mageta (Ochieng, 1975). From Tanzania were the Wahwa, “the cruel and war like Kamrembe”, Wasenge, Wahulama, Wagunga, and Waranda.

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Mageta was already an African Cosmo- cultural territory. One of the factors that made Mageta a logical spot for landing was that it was an Island five miles from the mainland, making it a safe place to settle while surveying the layout of the mainland. It was also fertile, therefore, supported the wandering ethnic groups with enough tropical crops like millets, yams, Cassava, Bananas and potatoes. It was also a prosperous fishing centre as well as a hippo hunting haven. Apart from possessing a wonderful climate, it was also a centre of advanced culture, with thriving civilization. The fishermen were the hunters, blacksmiths and agriculturalists.

The Nilotes interacted at this place with the Bantus. The outcome was a culture that provided roots for developments in many fields. The charm, spell, beauty and life in the Island caught the attention of a great European explorer Henry Morton Stanley when he went round the Lake in 1870 and found Mageta, one of the places along the Lake Victoria shores. He wrote: -

At 2 p.m we hoisted sail, and with a fair wind we are able to hug the main land and make good progress, within view of a very populous and extensively cultivated shore. This was the land of Mageta, we were told, and the same, which we had cited from the summit of Bridge Islands (Rusinga and Mfangano), where we saw a denser population and more clusters of large villages that we had beheld elsewhere...”. The continued infiltration of various cultural groups into the area since pre-colonial times has made it a cosmopolitan area and a prosperous economic hub (Bunde: oi: 2018).

The majority of clans in Mageta migrated much later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mainland in Yimbo and other regions in Luo-land. Today they represent the Waturi (Walowa) Kawamundhe, Wasihongo, Kamaganda, Wamandhawa, Odidi, Wagwegwe and Kanyibule and Wagumba (Osogo, 1966).

With the arrival of the British colonial administration, Mageta and the neighbouring Islands like Lolwe, Siro, Hama, Sagiti and Wayasi were depopulated because of the sleeping sickness which killed thousands of people along the forested fringes of Lake Victoria basin. The disease (sleeping sickness) engulfed the Lake basin in 1890. It was a tropical disease carried by tsetse flies that caused a cold sleep leading to death. It affected the Eastern shores of Lake Victoria from Busoga in Eastern Uganda, and spread to Samia, Bunyala, Yimbo, Sakwa upto Uyoma, Kanyada, Gwasi, Lambwe, Karungu and Kadem in Western Kenya.

The disease was so devastating that those people who lived near the Lake-shore were advised to move away to

other safe areas. Thousands of people died as a result of the pandemic. This later contributed to the spread ethnic groups towards the mainland and even beyond to Alego and Sakwa regions. Many people have recently gone back to the Island to till its fertile soils. There is already a thriving population on the island. The Island is today a location within Usigu Division of Siaya County (Levi: oi: 2017).

Evidence of Bantu remnants in Yimbo are presently found in the names of clans, schools and places like: Ulowa School after Walowa-waturi (who claim to be the original owners of Usenge hill in Kadimo where the first Luo Immigrants settled), Mageta after the settlement of Mageta clans and Usenge town after the Wasenge. Yimbo is a region that is bordered from the North by River Yala to the East by Alego and the West. It stretches up to Lake Victoria covering the Islands of Mageta, Sirigombe, Ng’eye, Wayasi, Siro, Magare, Hama and Lolwe (Ochieng”, 1975).

### 1.7.3. Settlement of Luo clans in Yimbo

The migration and settlement of Luo clans into Yimbo was in the form of three waves. The first wave involved the Goma and the Kalam. Kalam people descended from Ngia who lived in Alego. From Ng’iya, Kalam went to Nyajuok where he got poor reception. Kalam and his family, trekked to Uyoma where he crossed over Lake Victoria to settle in the present day Karachuonyo Location in South Nyanza.

Ng’iya had a son, *Naru*, (meaning Lake) who gave birth to two sons called Wanjare and Chwanya. The two disagreed after their father had died, making Wanjare to move into the present Kisii highlands where they were assimilated by the Abagusii. This move explains the current presence of Luo names in Kisii like Okora, Anyona, Osuga, Wanjare, which are very common among the Kisii.

Amongst Chwanya’s descendants were two brothers, Matewa and Ranjul, who sailed northwards and settled and camped East of Usenge hill, far off from Wasenge clan. They made a peace deal with Wasenge never to fight in the history of Yimbo. Like the Wasenge, the Kalam were later forced to migrate to Urima due to constant raids by the Kadimo Luos.

Goma people lived in Yimbo even before the arrival of the third wave of Luo invasion. A split occurred in Samia-Bunyala area within the Owiny group, caused by a disagreement over grazing arrangements. Gwanga, son of Goma, and his cousin, moved to Ugoma (present Port Victoria) around Samia hills. While at Ugoma, all his sons except Obio died from *Tung* (witchcraft). At Ugoma, the Goma inter-married with some people (most likely the Bantu speakers) from which they learned the art of pottery making.

Rabote married a native woman who knew pot making that became the art of Goma women upto date. After wandering about in Alego, they settled at Ng’iya where there was clay for pot making before they continued to Yimbo. In this area, they found several groups like Wahaga, Wagugwa and Walany whom they subdued. Obio had a number of sons who included Rabote, Nyagol, Nyandalo, Agoro, Gwanga, Oloo and Onyango with whom Goma clans descended. No

sooner did Goma people establish their authority over the subdued communities, than another Owiny party comprising of Munyejra, Owili and Dimo arrived to conquer Yimbo and later established Kadimo state (Ochieng, 1975).

## 2. Conclusions

These Bantu clans in Mageta Island and Yimbo mainland have been and continues to be treated as ethnic minorities, a group of people who differ in cultural origin from the dominant group Luo who are the majority population in Yimbo. The different identity between the two groups has been displayed in terms of social, economic and political opportunities espoused by members of the Luo group. Characteristically the minority bantu clans are recognized, but they are not necessarily accepted by the larger Luo society in which their members live. In some cases, particularly on political participation, the Bantu ethnic minorities have been simply excluded by the majority Luo community.

An unfortunate secondary characteristic of ethnic minority status in Yimbo is that it is often accompanied by prejudice and discrimination. Ethnic minorities in Yimbo tend to be at a disadvantage in most situations, most often because they are stigmatized as different from the norm. Such an impasse may produce an undesirable and unfair outcome in which a minority becomes acculturated but not assimilated. The most positive factor affecting change and acceptance in Yimbo is the degree of similarity, especially of language and culture, of the dominant Luo and minority Bantu cultures.

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