

## EXPLORING TRADITIONAL ROLES OF WOMEN AMONG THE BUKUSU IN PRECOLONIAL KENYA

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### Abstract

From existing scholarly sources, the traditional Bukusu community in western Kenya existed on a structured socio-economic, political, and cultural framework. Gender roles were played out distinctively by men and women, boys and girls. However, external factors continue to influence the contemporary community, creating a fluid and blurry distinction of roles. This paper focuses on women's roles in the

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traditional Bukusu community to uncover their cultural significance and impact on social structures. This article analyzes how these roles shaped the community's identity and influenced interpersonal and generational dynamics. To achieve this objective, the study uses a comprehensive literature review methodology and authors' observations from the Bukusu community to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the current body of knowledge. The literature review synthesizes data from ethnographic studies, historical texts, and relevant scholarly works; hence, this article provides a basis for understanding the historical and cultural significance of the roles of Bukusu women. We establish that women's traditional roles in the Bukusu community were based on the community's patrilineal structure, some of which continue to be reinforced. These included marriage, fecundity, childbearing, caregiving, food security, home management, ownership and wealth sources, and craftsmanship. In contrast, others continue to undergo significant transformations due to underlying factors that are not the focal point of this paper for now. Further, women's roles are deeply rooted in Bukusu cultural values and practices, which are critical in maintaining social cohesion and transmitting cultural heritage. This work is a foundation for further scholarly work on women, culture, and change.

**Keywords:** Traditional roles, Bukusu women, Cultural norms, Precolonial Kenya

**Discipline:** Cultural Anthropology

### **Absztrakt**

#### **A NŐK HAGYOMÁNYOS SZEREPEI A BUKUSU KÖZÖSSÉGBEN A GYARMATOSÍTÁS ELŐTTI KENYÁBAN**

A nyugati kenyai Bukusu közösség a rendelkezésre álló tudományos források alapján strukturált társadalmi-gazdasági, politikai és kulturális keretek között létezett. A nemi szerepek markánsan elkülönültek a férfiak és nők, valamint a fiúk és lányok között. Azonban a külső tényezők folyamatosan alakítják a kortárs közösséget, elmosva a hagyományos szerepek közötti határokat. Jelen tanulmány a Bukusu közösségben betöltött női szerepekre fókuszál, feltárva azok kulturális jelentőségét és társadalmi struktúrákra gyakorolt hatását. A cikk elemzi, hogy ezek a szerepek miként formálták a közösség identitását, valamint befolyásolták a társas és generációs dinamikát. A kutatás céljának elérése érdekében átfogó szakirodalmi elemzést alkalmazunk, amely kiegészül a szerzők Bukusu közösségben szerzett megfigyeléseivel. Az irodalmi áttekintés etnográfiai tanulmányok, történeti szövegek és releváns tudományos művek adatainak szintézisére épül. A tanulmány megállapítja, hogy a Bukusu közösség patrilineáris szerkezete határozta meg a nők hagyományos szerepeit, amelyek közül néhány továbbra is fennmaradt. Ide tartozik a házasság, a termékenység, a gyermekvállalás, a gondoskodás, az élelmezés-biztonság fenntartása, a háztartás irányítása, a tulajdon és vagyon forrásainak biztosítása, valamint a kézművesség. Ezzel szemben más szerepek jelentős átalakuláson mentek keresztül olyan tényezők hatására, amelyek nem képezik e tanulmány fókuszát. Továbbá a női szerepek mélyen beágyazódnak a Bukusu kulturális értékeibe és gyakorlataiba, amelyek elengedhetetlenek a társadalmi kohézió fenntartásában és a kulturális örökség átadásában. E munka alapot biztosít a nők, a kultúra és a társadalmi változások további tudományos vizsgálatához.

**Kulcsszavak:** tradicionális szerepek, bukusu nők, kulturális normák, gyarmatosítás előtti Kenya

**Diszciplína:** kulturális antropológia

For a long time, gender has been a basis of social organization in many communities, shaping not only individual identities but also collective societal dynamics (Meyers, 2002). Oftentimes, these roles are deeply entrenched in cultural norms, determining expectations, responsibilities, and behaviors that are deemed appropriate for women and men (Kimmel, 2000). African traditional pre-colonial societies had dynamic gender relations and categorization of roles in which some roles were exclusive to each gender while others were mutually interdependent (Saidi, 2020). Similarly, the pur-views of females and males in African societies were often described as separate and complementary (Sudarkasa, 1986). Similarly, the Bukusu people of western Kenya are renowned for their vibrant and deeply engrained traditions. At the core of their way of life are clearly defined roles that govern their activities such as ceremonial activities, leadership, economy, religion, and customs to list but a few (Hepburn, 2023). These roles are, however, constructed oriented, practiced, and passed down through generations. Delving into these roles with special reference to women in the Bukusu community offers worthy insights into how cultural traditions, values, and power dynamics are conserved, contested, and changed periodically as noted by Shepherd (2014).

In this community, gender roles are more than fixed constructs but are highly embedded in rituals, language, and day-to-day practices. For instance, men were given responsibilities ranging from providers to protectors and were mostly responsible for public-facing activities. In contrast, women on the other hand focused on roles of nurturing, and caretaking and revolved around domestic responsibilities. These distinctions of the roles will further be delved into in the discussion and analysis sections of the article. It is worth mentioning that while the review will deal with Bukusu community specificities in women's roles, there is a chance to have a comparative analysis of

other communities to unearth patterns of cultural similarities and differences. Of key concern in this paper is the different roles of women in the traditional community. This owes to the contemporary gender roles that seem fluid and blurry, hence the need to trace the traditional roles with a focus on women.

This paper, thus, explores the traditional roles of women focusing on the clear distinction between men and women to illuminate how they sustained their socio-economic and political structures and cultural fixations with little situational adjustments. Compared to the contemporary context, the current organization of the community structure and gender role-playing appears to have become blurry due to the cross-cutting factors that continue to influence the community. Among the prevailing factors of influence comprise religious activities such as Christianity, Islam, trading activities, colonialism, and globalization, all considered external influences of modernity. While these factors affected all and sundry, this study's question is, what were the roles of women among the Bukusu in the traditional setting? To answer this question, this paper deductively explores the traditional ways of life of the Bukusu community. It is relevant to approach this aspect historically and chronologically so that we can understand deeply and comprehensively how the traditional activities of the community's culture, cognition, behavior, and interaction patterns manifested while narrowing down to the gender role dynamics that ensued around this era.

This article is based on the field of Anthropological study, focusing on the role of women in the Bukusu community during the traditional epoch in Kenya. The community mainly inhabits Bungoma County located in western Kenya bordering Uganda to the west and several other Kenyan counties including Busia, Kakamega, Busia, and Trans-Nzoia. The County is rich in socio-cultural identity, dominated by the Bukusu sub-

tribe of the Luhya ethnic Bantu-speaking group alongside other small communities such as the Sabaot, Teso, and Kikuyu with a general population of 1.8 million approximately (Statistics Kenya, 2025). Figure 1 below shows the geographical location of the Bukusu people on the map.

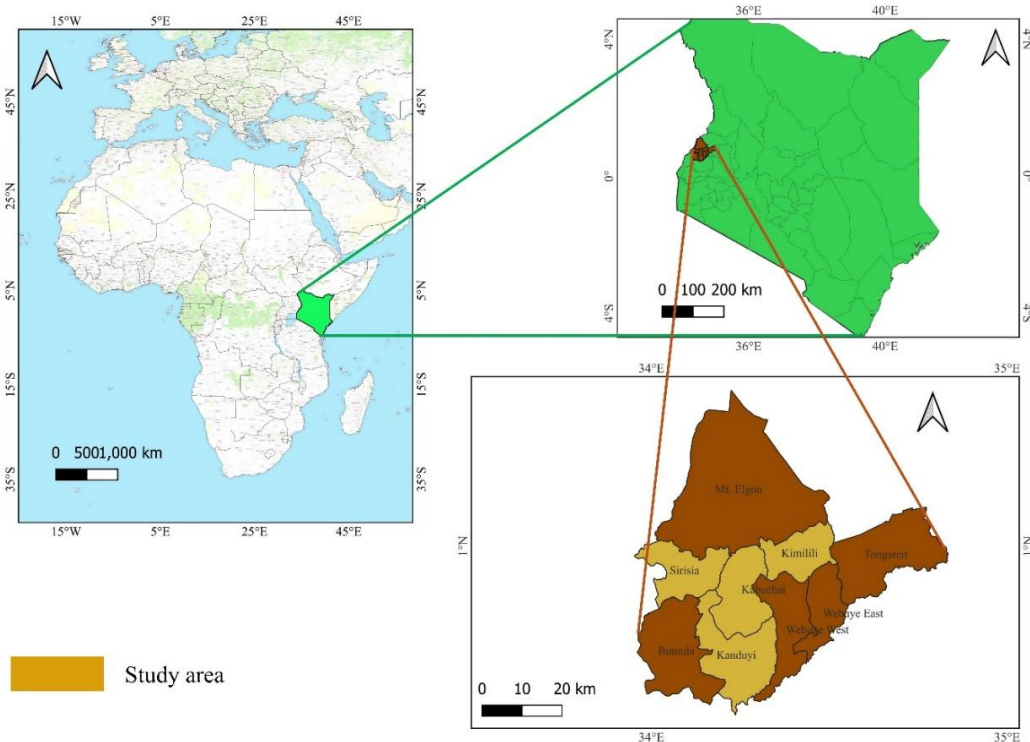
This study adopted a literature review as its primary method of investigation. It analyzed the existing academic works, ethnographic accounts, and historical records. This is not a comprehensive review, rather it is an introduction to exploring the traditional roles of women within the Bukusu community. The review examines cultural and societal phenomena owing to the diversity of perspectives and insights drawing from previous scholarly works and data from personal observations made during the 2024 field trip to

Bungoma County Kenya from August to September 2024. Although there exists a significant gap in knowledge of the Bukusu women. This review article identifies patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the knowledge pointing out the need for field research to help seal the knowledge gap. It is worth noting that the literature on the women in the Bukusu community is fragmented and does not directly relate to this research focus.

### Traditional Roles and their Categorization in Bukusu Society

Among the classical scholars who studied individual roles in the African tribal communities is Radcliff-Brown. While in South Africa, Radcliff Brown taught the African Kinship system in some African communities.

Figure 1. The map of Bungoma County inside the Kenyan map



In one of his essays, he studied the relationship between the mother's brother and the sister's son among the Thonga people of South Africa. He establishes that a son often had certain unique property rights over his mother's brother (uncle). Radcliff-Brown concluded that the Thonga community was at some point in the past a matrilineal system (Radcliff-Brown, 1994). Radcliffe-Brown's study of the Thonga people is comparable to the Bukusu community due to shared cultural and structural features. The kinship structures define relationships and responsibilities within the family and community. At the beginning of the early nineteenth century, the East African interior was still very secluded in the region in comparison with other eras of Africa. In Kenya, apart from the coastal region that was already vibrant with the Arab, Swahili, and Portuguese traders' activities who did not venture beyond the small stretch of land along the Indian Ocean. Suggestively, the rest of the country was traditionally intact with communities sparsely scattered in various parts (Ombongi & Rutten, 2005). The reflection of women's roles was demonstrated in their daily activities as part of their contribution to the community but also as the bearers of cultural heritage and identity. All these were passed down to generations through all the stages of growth and development. The lived experiences of boys and girls centered on orientating them to adult responsibilities in the community (Mbiti, 1990). For this article, we focus on the Bukusu society in the western region of Kenya, where the study is centered. Both men and women in Bukusu society are believed as persons of almost the same physical and spiritual parts except for biological functioning in their reproductive system. However, the term person (*omundu*) is only used to denote men. According to Menkiti (1948:172), the term "omundu" includes an idea of excellence, of the "fullness of maturity." Thus, according to the Bukusu community, women do not possess

excellence and maturity (Wolf, 2019). Rather a woman (*Omukhasi*) is a generic term that connotes her genderhood as opposed to her personhood.

While the argument is true in separating womanhood from personhood, I think the seemingly derogative connotation is misleading since a man also has a connotation to the term "*omusecha*" which separates man from his personhood. Nevertheless, the separation of man and woman based on these connotations forms the basis upon which their productive activities are constructed as male or female roles and others being common to both genders (Nangendo, 1994). Interestingly, it is culturally acceptable for women to perform certain activities identified with the male gender, however, a man should not cross to perform female roles as will be seen in subsequent sections on the separated roles of both genders, the activities performed by both genders included milking, cows, and pottery, although the latter was limited in the sense that men exclusively potted pots meant for rituals. Women's status such as age or marital status determined their specified roles. While both men and women passed through the same life stages of the growth and development cycle, there were rituals performed at every stage from birth to death of a person. Some of the rituals were parallel to each other but at other times, they were different.

Traditionally, many of these rituals were practically marked through rites of passage whereas others were simply acknowledged without any basic ritual (Wolf, 2019). For instance, in the Gikuyu community, when a woman gave birth, she ululated five times if the child was a boy and four times if it was a girl. However, this was not the case among the Bukusu as there were no ululations, although the birth of a child elicited excitement followed by a myriad of complex rituals that were meant to protect the mother and the newborn from the evil eyes as well as to cleanse the baby who was believed to be ritually unclean at birth. According to Neille and Penn (2017), traditional

gender roles often confine women to domestic responsibilities, limiting their participation in public life. Almost from birth, girls are raised for marriage and raising a family. Rather, according to Fafunwa (1982), a girl is perceived as a responsible person from early childhood. The way she is raised qualifies her to uphold the role of her mother. She must be restricted to domestic space to be a good wife and avoid flaws. In the Bukusu community, a girl child is raised with some attendance that shows activities around the house and home vicinity. This perspective is sought in this article to demonstrate the perspective of the Bukusu people on a girl child.

While having an informal chat with a middle-aged woman, she narrated that when a child is born, their value to the community is determined by their gender. According to her, the value of a boy is less as it is upon him to appreciate his value. For the girlchild, her value is seen in her role as a mother and as a wife to the community. Girls in traditional settings were confined in the home setting and mainly under the care of their mothers. Conversely, boys would be taken as outsiders such as in the grazing fields. A portrayal of this was by Shostak (1983) who actively observed the way the Kung people of Botswana raised their children. According to Shostak, girls were always under the clock of their mothers. This was seen when mothers went to gather fruits, Nisa the protagonist of Shostak's book, a middle-aged woman in the Kung community was in the company of her mother, learning how to gather wild fruits. On the other hand, her brother accompanied his father on a hunting mission, demonstrating how the traditional roles of girls and boys were played and nurtured in their adulthood. The analysis of the book about Nisa's experience from childhood to womanhood resonates with the Bukusu society's traditional women's cultural expectations. Still, around childbirth, women were expected to meet certain expectations as there were occurrences that

called for ritual performances since they were considered unusual or "abnormal". Bukusu society where the birth of a child was determined and the ritualistic activities that followed afterward. For example, the birth of twins was considered a blessing as it enhanced the respect the mother enjoyed in the family, especially the in-laws. Thus, elaborate celebrations that involved music and dance were reserved for twins and not single-born children. On the contrary, twin boys born as firstborns were believed to be a bad omen. They were never celebrated as they were believed to cause misfortune to the family and clan. To mitigate this, infanticide was performed on one of the twins secretly.

In similar cases, a mother could also be divorced as she was also considered a bad omen to the family (Wekesa, 2015). We interpret this that it was believed that women were vested with the responsibility of the gender of children. They were also expected to give birth to the beliefs, values, and expectations of the clan. Thus, the occurrence of unexpected meant women were unfit to bear their belonging to the family and the matrimonial clan. In the same vein, women who gave birth to twins in "normal" circumstances were secluded from the rest of the family and clan to protect the mother and the twins. Owing to their birth being unusual, twins were considered to be in danger hence their protection through the seclusion process until the time of coming out (Khukhwikula bukhwana) through a welcome ceremony of music and dance among other rituals of gifting the newborns (Wekesa, 2015).

We postulate that the seclusion of the mother and the twin was meant to help avoid "bad" eyes at least not at that vulnerable stage of life. Thus, women like, men during the initiation period were secluded from the community. Women are agents of lineage propagation and life producers through giving birth were protected from the evil forces of the community at such times. With children came

the responsibility of childcare. There is a phrase in Bukusu that goes “*Embwa ebukulanga kbuchochomala kbwa mawe*”; meaning, a puppy/dog squats like her mother. So, it was the prerogative of women to raise their children especially girls who were perceived as the reflection of their identity (Barasa et al., 2023). In essence, children were required to emulate the virtues displayed by their mothers. The values including what was deemed good morals in children were to be instilled by mothers and women in general, since the commonality of the community allowed for collective responsibility to discipline children whenever it was necessary. This is also due to the belief in numerous African societies that children belonged to society and thus, society was responsible for raising the very children (Adeyemi, 2002). Plucknett and Smith (2012) assert that children were a valuable source of labor for the family and community.

Comparatively, another study conducted on the Idakho community, a related Luhya community that shares some customs with the Bukusu, established that children were trained at an early age to share the duties of family life. At about the age of six, boys began to herd sheep, goats, and cattle, a duty that they outgrew after being circumcised (Kavulavu, 2015). The two sources postulate the responsibility of a woman to be fruitful in terms of bearing children, or rather indirectly women determined the source and continuity of labor in the family and clan through generation continuity. Transitioning from childhood to adolescence involved various aspects of traditions that revolved around orientation to soon-to-be adult responsibilities. Thus, before, marriage, a Bukusu girl was cicatrized with razors on her face and body symbolizing her readiness for marriage (Nangendo, 1994). Observations made during interaction with interlocutors point out that the cicatrization was a common practice in preparation for Bukusu women for marriage since the elderly women and the youngest 70 years old

appeared to have scars on their faces. They attested that they had undergone the ritual before getting married and it was not only a symbol of marriage readiness but also a beautification exercise and they associated the markings with tattoos.

Other rituals followed during marriage included the virginity test by the aunts on the wedding day ushering a girl's transition to womanhood and this case married woman omukhasi. Like the Luo community where girls were expected to keep themselves virgins until marriage (Ngutuku & Okwany, 2024), Bukusu girls too were expected to abstain from penetrative sex until marriage as chastity was a virtue for raising good families. They were cautioned from having sex and falling pregnant before marriage as they were highly stigmatized for bearing children out of marriage. However, if it happened, girls were referred to derogatively as nasikoko. Such a woman would be married off to an elderly man (Ngutuku & Okwany, 2024). This pares also with the sentiments by Akong'a, (1988) that among the Luo and Abaluhya (Bukusu are part of) people of western Kenya, virginity at marriage for women was rewarded with high status in society and her mother received material rewards in addition to the negotiated bridewealth payment usually received and controlled by the male household heads. Thus, it was in the interest of a Bukusu woman to keep themselves pure until marriage to protect their own and families honor and integrity. Comparatively, this is opposed to some of the Bantu-speaking communities in Kenya like the Akamba and the Amerus where it was shameful for a bride to be a virgin as they were expected to “know men” and fears of infertility among other sexual anomalies (Kioli, 2012).

African worldview envisions the child as an active agent, developing in a sociocultural field in which full personhood is a matter of assent, acquired by degrees during growth (Nsamenang, 1992). In their assent to adulthood, adolescents

construct and shape their social identities through successive interpersonal encounters and experiences that make up their history. In this essence, adolescents are obliged to construct a gender and ethnic identity consistent with the cultural scripts and gender demands of their world perception (Grigorenko, 2009).

Generally conceived, traditional African socialization can be viewed as cultivation into and through fundamental roles at different phases of life (Brown et al., 2002). Adolescents in traditional African societies have historically played significant roles in their families and communities, often shaped by cultural norms, rites of passage, and communal responsibilities (du Plessis & Naude, 2017.) These roles were intertwined with the social, economic, and spiritual fabric of their communities. Kenya, like most African countries, is a multiethnic country with diverse ethnic groups. These groups raised their children based on the norms, values, and beliefs of their culture. For instance, girls and boys underwent rites of passage in transitioning into adulthood. Some of the rites of passage included initiation. For some Bantu communities such as the Gusii community, girls were and are even now undergoing initiation in preparation for marriage (Nakamura et al., 2023).

In the case of the Bukusu community, a cultural memory by a group of respondents averred that Bukusu adolescent girls were circumcised. However, they noted with caution that this was not a typical traditional practice among the Bukusu, rather it was an acculturated practice from the neighboring Kalenjin communities such as the Sabaot in Mt. Elgon and Trans-Nzoia regions of western Kenya (Were, 2014). This was especially true when asked about the significance of the circumcision of Bukusu girls, they said it had no significance as it was a borrowed practice that did not last for long. There is barely any evidence of the origin of the practice in the Bukusu society. In other roles, Bukusu girls were taught to be home-

makers, nurturers, and community caretakers. These roles were taught to them by their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. It was the collective responsibility of the community to inculcate communalism through activities such as communal labor on farms, ceremonies, and home-building (Gumo, 2018).

In the adolescent stage girls just like boys ceased sleeping in their parent's house into esimba, (the house of a bachelor), and in this case it was usually the house of an old woman, the real or classificatory grandmother, unlike boys who constructed a new house or moved into a friends' houses. The role of this elderly woman is to supervise the moral conduct of the girls as a prerequisite for their nearing marriage life after puberty. Since they lived in a communal setting, one elderly house was preferred for a couple of girls in one village. They would spend the day at their parents' homestead and perform their daily chores, however, they would go to sleep in the elderly woman's house.

Girls and boys played roles in labor and economic contributions to sustain their families and communities. In agriculture, boys and girls offered surplus labor in planting, weeding, harvesting, and tending livestock. The division of labor was evident through their assistance whereas boys helped men break soil and tend to livestock, girls on the other hand planted and weeded crops. This was reiterated by Kavulavu (2015) who asserted that in precolonial Kenya, men would go and clear virgin land, break the earth, and help women plant crops while women weeded crops.

In craftsmanship, girls learned basket weaving although the latter was carried out by both genders (Wolff, 1970) . Pottery was practiced by old women who were beyond childbearing age, therefore, girls were forbidden from pottery as it was believed it could affect their fertility. Economic activity has dwindled and is on the verge of disappearance.



Household duties were performed by adolescent girls in the Bukusu community. They were responsible for fetching water for the family and community. According to Kavulavu (2015), Idakho girls assisted their mothers in the daily work of fetching water, gathering firewood, wild roots, and vegetables, and grinding finger millet on the traditional grinding stone. They shared responsibilities with their peers from the Bukusu community. Further, they performed motherly duties of babysitting younger siblings especially when their mothers were attending to other duties such as cooking or weeding.

Other than family roles, girls and boys participated in communal activities helping to uphold cohesion. Boys and girls took part in traditional dances, singing, and storytelling to preserve their cultural heritage (Ogbomo, 2005). While women oversaw taking care of the elderly in families and communities, children also helped relieve women of such responsibilities. Boys and girls were sent to their grandparents to help them with some tasks and even offer company to them. For instance, girls were sent to live with their grandmothers to help them fetch water, collect firewood, and even weed the garden. In communal ceremonies, girls were relied upon to ensure guests were received, served with food, and washing of utensils. In the same vein, water fetching and firewood collection for the ceremony were their main role. This not only showed their assistance role but also instilled in them a sense of cooperation, leadership, and accountability.

As averred by Seroto, (2011), the African notably among the Bantu-speaking societies, a child was brought up by the community and educated in the culture and traditions of the community. The indigenous education system comprised traditions, legends and tales, and the procedures and knowledge associated with rituals which were passed down orally from generation to generation within each tribe. In the Bukusu community, girls

were trained through apprenticeship to learn some skills in roles such as marriage, fecundity, midwifery, caregiving, and home management as discussed successively. Marriage was and still is a valuable sacred and religious institution among the Bukusus just like communities in Kenya.

However, there were practices, beliefs, values, and expectations of a Bukusu woman. Expected to get married upon attaining puberty, the girl was to be married off to a partner who earned her parent's and clan elder's approval. However, upon learning that the lady was due to get married, the mother to the prospective husband would visit the boy's family and bring along with her a hoe in a woven basket with a friend. This is symbolic indicating they are asking their daughter for a hand in marriage and this information is reported to the boy's father. The father would respond by making a wooden hand fit onto the hoe meaning they accept the marriage. Therefore, absconding marriage was considered taboo among the Bukusu. Since marriage was a family matter, every step was taken to ensure that a suitable spouse was chosen (Wepukhulu et al., 2023).

Efforts were invested in conducting thorough background checks on potential suitors to ensure it helped evade any cases of abomination such as exogamy, or witchcraft. This implies that the Bukusu community women were all raised to become married off as it was a prerequisite for one's community status as an adult female. In contemporary times, women and men alike are at liberty to stay celibate or unmarried as it is deemed one's personal choice whereas traditionally, it was in the best interest of the community and not the individual.

A woman's status in marriage was reinforced through socialization. The culturally supposed and appropriate conduct assumed the roles that were composed of submission, nurturance, subordination, and docility (Bah & Barasa, 2023). In a similar study, a married woman was expected to be

submissive, and docile while her husband enjoyed her obedience from her (Nangendo, 1994). The submission did not warrant any level of cruelty or violence and in case of it, the woman would separate from the husband. This move was supported by the clan. Even with that, there have been studies such as (Mbembe, 2001) and (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 2015) to same just a new pointing out that women in African societies held lower status compared to men.

Well, we think that this view is portrayed through the contemporary lens of movements such as women's movements, otherwise, our analysis gives the impression that the expectations of men and women were perceived as complementary and in the best interest of community cohesion. Wolf (2019) suggests that the married woman's status was augmented based on her fulfillment of biological reproductive functions and other social roles. Motherhood is the elevated status of a married woman to the family and clan as well as the entire community. A woman was expected to be prolific to provide their spouse with a large family by bearing many children. This owes to the value of many children as a source of wealth, labor, and propagation of the name of the husband, his lineage, and clan.

A barren woman's status was relegated as it was believed that she possessed evil spirits and thus, was given some herbal medicines procured from an old woman to make her fertile. Further, at times, the woman was taken to her father's home where cattle was slaughtered for her and a piece of skin cut and put around her head to ward off the evil spirit and bring on fertility (Nangendo, 1994).

From our perspective, the Bukusu community believed in progeny and that everyone was born to propagate their lineage, thus, the inability to reproduce which was mainly measured by women was viewed as negative forces such as curses or spells, thus, rituals were formed to welcome good forces of fertility and reproduction.

Cultural heritage was highly valued in the Bukusu community as women and men alike played significant parts in passing down knowledge, practices, beliefs and from one generation to another mainly through oral traditions (Wafukho et al., 2022). As such motherhood was associated with the responsibility of nurturing babies into children, adolescents, and mature responsible women. In their early years, children spent a lot of their time with their mothers. Mothers taught children good conduct such as how to carry themselves in society being responsible courteous, brave, and obedient to name a few. Oral traditions were significantly utilized to orient children with good behavior. For example, riddles, songs, and tales were used to encourage virtues and discourage vices respectively. Grandmothers too helped married daughters and daughters-in-law especially when slept with their grandchildren in their huts (Nangendo, 1994). Elderly women were sources of oral traditions through which good morals, life skills, and lessons were passed down from one generation to another through myths, and folktales. Personal observation shows a disparate relationship between the old and the young generations. Rarely are older women living with their grandchildren as the latter spend most of their time in schools and towns rather than in the villages.

According to (Wolf, 2019), there was a sexual division of production in the community of the Bukusu people. Men and women had clear expectations for each sex. Traditionally, Bukusuland historically played roles around household management, and caregiving to the family and community. They were confined to domestic responsibilities such as sustenance occupations on the farm including weeding, collecting firewood, foraging for vegetables, fetching water, cleaning, cooking, raising children, and supporting the elderly members of the family and the clan. Notwithstanding, the Bukusu women had unique roles constructed and oriented to them by the

community. For example, it was established that Bukusu women's role was not only to bear children but also to bear many children. Fecundity (the ability to bear many children) was one precondition to a sustainable marriage for a Bukusu couple.

While it was not solely dependent on the woman as men too were known to be potentially impotent, women often bore the burden of barrenness in the families. According to Wekesa, (2015), barrenness among married couples in the Bukusu was blamed on women. A woman who did not bear children was referred to derogatorily and was often subjected to a co-wife in the that she bore children and had to endure ridicule from the co-wife and community as a waste. More often, they would be divorced and whenever they died, they were buried on the edge of the homestead. Further, a deceased barren Bukusu woman's body was passed through a hole opening created at the rear end of the house to the burial site. From these revelations, it can be postulated that largely, Bukusu women were responsible for children in a marriage and that men were believed to be potent. Fertility issues were the woman's responsibility since a woman's first contribution to the family was seen through the lens of her ability to conceive and bear children. Barrenness was believed to be a curse. Muyila (1992) also reveals that a Bukusu man was allowed to get an additional wife if the current one was unable to bear children. This confirms the belief that women were believed to be responsible for bearing children for their spouses since a man's progeny was through his children. In line with the caregiving roles of women were their ritualistic roles in community events such as circumcision, marriage, and divinity.

Wolf (1971) observes that during the boy's traditional circumcision, there were specified roles for individual kin members of the initiate noting that on the day of circumcision, the initiate's maternal aunt washed away the superfluous mud on the riverbank when he was on the other hand

being smeared on with mud by his father's younger brother or initiate's elder brother alternately. Upon arriving home from the river, the paternal aunt gave him some freshly brewed beer. He also mentions that after circumcision, the grandmother of the circumcised boy would clean him by removing the mud off his head and clear up the prepuce that was dropped on the ground by wrapping them in banana fibers and disposing of them secretly not allowing anybody to see as this would help avoid people with ill intentions on the boy.

### **Women's Role in Bukusu Society Economic System**

As active agents of cultural heritage, women lived through expressions through traditions that were inherited from ancestors and passed them down to descendants through intangible resources including already mentioned oral traditions, social practices, rituals, and the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. This section tackles how women expressed their skills in crafts (Banda et al., 2024).

Traditional craftsmanship was shaped by an intricate interplay of environmental, social, economic, cultural, and technological factors. These factors reflected the community's values, identity, and environments, ensuring the crafts were not only functional but also culturally significant. For instance, the availability of natural resources locally often dictated the types of crafts that developed in the region. Wood carving was practiced by communities living around forested areas while pottery was in regions with abundant clay soil. In these craft activities, social structures were played as gender roles. The discussion about women's craftsmanship in the Bukusu community involves a comparison with neighboring communities in which economic activities were carried out in barter trade. It is also worth highlighting that craftsmanship is the cultural heritage in preserving traditional skills and transmission from one

generation to the next. Thus, such crafts carry symbolic, motifs and techniques unique to the Bukusu and demonstrate the gendered cultural daily activities of men and women. Simiyu (1991) notes that women were active participants in the gender-decision craftwork whereby women beyond childbearing age were responsible for pottery since this art of modeling was considered sacred. Hence, partaking in it would likely affect one's fertility. On the other hand, men practiced wood carvings, basketry, leather working, and smelting, whose products were used in barter trade. According to Nangendo (1994), weaved baskets and traditional food baskets (chindubi, vikono, bitelu) were smeared with a thin layer of cow dung by women ready for use or sale. Women within the child-bearing age bracket were restricted by Bukusu cultural taboos that considered them impure to practice an almost sacred associated practice. It is further noted that the art of pottery not only served subsistence needs such as water preservation and traditional liquor "Chang'aa" and "Busaa" but also led barter trade with other Luhya and non-Luhya communities.

Retrospection on the author's precursor works, Simiyu (1973)) notes that women in the Bukusu community were responsible for nurturing children and adolescent girls and instilling acceptable conduct such as obedience. Conversely, nurturing circumcised boys was the responsibility of their fathers and uncles. With similar sentiments in support of the curator's words are Muleka and Okoth (2022) who note that one of the salient statuses of a woman in the Luhya community of western Kenya was participation in housebuilding whereby they were required to smoothen walls and floors with mud and cow dung while men put up the structure with wooden poles and thatched the roofs of their huts. They reiterate that it is taboo for women to climb on house roofs. Conversely, the case was different in other non-Luhya communities like Kikuyu where women thatched

houses an action equated to covering something. Therefore, it was symbolic of implying the ability to keep their home secreted and women were guardians of family and homes from being exposed to outsiders. To the Bukusu people, women were forbidden because it was indecent for a woman to be watched from the ground since they were supposed to carry themselves modestly. Climbing the top of a house or a tree seemed to contradict the demure and decorous expectations of a woman. Rather, the only time that woman climbed on the top of the house was when her husband died; she was obliged to remove the shaft that was installed on the pinnacle of their hut's rood symbolizing the male as the head of the home.

Therefore, a widow was allowed to remove it three days after her husband's death (Nangendo, 1994, Wandibba, 1972 Nangendo, 1994). This also meant that in the absence of the husband, the widow takes up the responsibility as demonstrated in the preceding discussion. Another craft of women was making traditional salt which is more of vegetable salt. Women used a variety of plants including dry banana leaves (Kamsanja), star grass (lukhafwa, maize cobs (bisokoro), and palm trees (Kamakhendu). A mix of either of the leaves from these plants would be mixed further with dry cattle dung before being burnt to ash. The ash was left to cool; after which the ash would be mixed with water through a filtration process and the resulting liquid was used as liquid salt. The ash salt would be kept in baskets and pots for future use (Nangendo, 1994). This practice of traditional salt-making is still evident as observed during the visit to two villages in Bungoma County.

Traditional ways of preparing vegetables still use this ash salt despite the availability of commercial salt. All elderly women interlocutors unanimously confirmed that they use ash salt to supplement the commercial salt, and they use it specifically for their traditional vegetables which provides a unique and nostalgic taste of food. Aside from that,

calabash making was a women's monopoly and was made from gourds (Nangendo, 1994). They made calabashes purely domestic items as they were mostly used for storing household goods such as seeds, ash salt, water, and milk, and served as utensils such as food bowls, scoops, spoons, ladles, etc. In our view, the domestic nature of the functions of calabashes, and their manufacturing was exclusively Bukusu women's responsibility.

The goods they produced were not only meant for local consumption but rather trading them for other goods with other communities was a viable economic activity among the Bukusu people. They thrived in exchange for goods for goods among themselves and with other neighboring communities, such as the Sabaot. From home, they received smoked meat, honey, and milk and from the Nandi and Maasai, they got bows, arrows, and spears respectively while they obtained hoes from the Samia people. The above-mentioned crafts were instrumental in the trading activities.

Although pots, calabash, salt, iron, and leather were not the only items being traded, other commodities included farm produce such as vegetables, sorghum, finger millet, sweet potatoes, and bananas (Nangendo, 1994). This literature confirms that women in this community were actively involved in economic activities although selectively participated took part as others were reserved for men. While men were active in trading weapons, women traded on food stuffs and household-related items.

Other than being creators of wealth and resources through craftsmanship activities, women were also regarded as sources of wealth, and ownership; exemplified through levirate and sororate marriages. Such marriage arrangements for women served to preserve wealth, property, and social stability within families and kinship groups of the Bukusu. When they were married off, the bride's wealth paid to her parents in terms of cattle and other gifts fetched a substantial amount of

wealth. More bride's wealth (kumwaulo) would be circulated and used by her brothers to pay for the bride's wealth when getting married (Wepukhulu et al., 2023). It is deserving to compare the Bukusu women to their neighbors. Like their counterparts such as the Idakho, a married woman among the Bukusu people belonged to the clan (Kavulavu, 2015).

A Bukusu woman was obliged to be inherited by the husband's brother upon the demise of her husband whether the husband had paid off the wealth to her parents. They could continue siring children and the bride's wealth be paid to seal the marriage and for the woman and children to remain within the clan. This was meant to continue the progeny of the clan. An informant stated that it was a Bukusu belief that if they let the widow get married elsewhere, she would deprive the family and clan of their wealth as she would take some resources with her to another clan.

In considering credible sources for understanding cultural and socio-economic dynamics in Bukusu society, Cultural Hub TV (Bukusu local television channel) serves as a credible source for understanding the Bukusu society's socio-cultural dynamics, offering expert insights, indigenous knowledge, investigative reporting, multimedia evidence, and collaborations with reputable institutions. An informant on Culture Hub TV airing Bukusu cultural insight, confirmed exceptions for wife inheritance; and that letting go of the widow depended on two factors; one was whether or not her bride's price had been paid fully being her deceased husband. If the bride price had not been paid, the clan would let her family decide on her stay. Additionally, if the dowry had been paid fully or partially, the widow's family was at liberty to return the dowry and claim their daughter in cases where they felt it was a bad omen for their daughter to be a widow at a young age; hence believed the family is not well suitable for their daughter. Secondly, if children were involved,

especially boys, she was compelled to stay in her matrimonial home and hence be inherited (Hub TV, 2024). Further, while inheritance occurred, a widow had some “isolated” role to play in her inheritance. In varied instances, a widow was autonomous in determining her potential inheritor. She would evaluate her potential clansmen's conduct, such as, but not limited to, how they treated her and her children and what they brought to her home during visits. This helped widows shun men who were just driven by sexual desires rather than genuine care for her, children and their general welfare (Hub TV, 2024).

The literature corroborates what (Wepukhulu et al. (2023) assert that marriage was meant to be permanent and did not end in death as a woman whose bridewealth was paid was inherited by the deceased man's kin who would sire children with her to continue their brother's lineage. Moreover, a woman also played a role in determining her welfare and that of her children upon the death of her husband. Children cemented the widow's status in the clan she was married to unless her family decided otherwise by returning her dowry. The woman was “owned” by the clan and thus, justified her inheritance. In the same vein, a study by (Wepukhulu et al., 2023) state that according to Bukusu customary law, a man could inherit his brother's wife, a widow from his lineage, and a young wife of his father, assuming that his father's brothers or father's cousins in the same clan have declined or if the widow herself has refused them and specifically chosen him. Also, a man could inherit his cousin's wife provided that the cousin dies leaving no brother who can inherit the widow.

Nevertheless, in as much as marriages were arranged, a woman was not compelled to get married to a man she objected to as it was believed she would become a troublemaker in the marriage and the union would not last and hence bring shame to the family. Widows who were likable in their matrimonial homes were more likely to be

inherited than those who were less likable. For example, hardworking women were seen as an asset to the clan and thus worth keeping. A Bukusu expression “omukoko silundu” or “a sister is a garden” signifies their hard work on the farm to ensure the family's welfare (Precious & Onyango, 2020). Hard work was a prerequisite for a Bukusu woman as she was seen as she would perform all farming-related activities to keep away poverty and hunger from her home. A lazy woman who could not showcase skills in tilling land, bearing children, and cooking for the clan and visitors was considered a liability to the husband.

Laziness was likely to lead to divorce or polygamy kind of marriage. Commenting on the same, a respondent alluded that a lazy woman was married off to an old man. Alternatively, if she married, people would say that motherhood would wake her from slumber. This means that bearing and raising children was a vast responsibility that demanded hard work as it was a woman's responsibility. Being a mother, her circumstances would force her to be responsible.

Bukusu women played a significant role in decision-making processes in the family and community. Women had great powers regarding land matters and made decisions concerning their marital land (Natembe, 1999). For example, a man could not lease or give out his piece of land without the wife's consent. Bukusu women likely played a key role in food production and distribution in the community, which may explain their significant influence in land-related decision-making. We interpret that women's involvement in land matters also owed to land being their main means of production and as food custodians, they were directly involved. In cases of old age or impairment, the wife cultivated the land and could sue anyone who trespassed and could evict anyone who forcefully cultivated the land. In fact, in cases of death, the son had to seek the mother's consent to sue anyone regarding land matters. In inter-

gender relations, a wife represents the husband in many family and marital matters. For example, although uncircumcised, a woman shared her husband's age set and therefore could enjoy the privilege of earning a token (lubaka) associated with age set (sisingilo) mates (bakoki) if the husband is dead (Wandibba & Ikanda, 2005). The dynamics of widow inheritance and her role in sealing her husband's gap in family property inheritance were evident in the traditional Bukusu community. This could have been the reason widows were inherited by the inheritor, to help the deceased husband's lineage continue and to manage the resources left behind, including children.

We postulate that in the traditional Bukusu land tenure, women had the right to sue and evict trespassers and settle land disputes as they were the main cultivators of the land. This was due to the communal land ownership where despite the patrilineality, women equally owned land through their husbands. For example, once the married men demarcated their portions of land, they allotted portions to their wives, married sons, and daughters for cultivation, although the latter could not inherit land as they were expected to marry outside the clans and so they could inherit land through their future husbands (Kevane, 2011).

Unlike the unmarried son, an unmarried daughter owned granaries or bibiaki/birara where she stored farm reaps and whenever it was full, the surplus would be given to another granary to fill with food harvest. Upon her marriage, all the produce in her granaries was transferred to her father-in-law's granary who then would distribute the food to his kith and his kin, and more than half went to his daughter-in-law for her household consumption (Nangendo, 1994). This suggests that unmarried girls owned land and utilized it to equip themselves for their future life as a married woman, as they were expected to bring some food reserves into their marital homes. As always already mentioned,

women ensured food security and this was symbolic of their role as food custodians.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This study underscores the importance of the traditional roles of women as a cornerstone of the Bukusu community's cultural heritage, demonstrating their role in fostering social cohesion and passing down values across generations. It established that women's roles in the Bukusu community are intertwined with the Bukusu community's identity, and values to serve as a basis for social organization and cultural preservation. From childhood to adulthood, women were socialized into the cultural definitions of the community expectations of men and women.

Girls were raised to take up the roles of motherhood, thus, the form of traditional learning through apprenticeship shapes them for adult life. With several expectations for daughters transitioning into wives, mothers, and nurturers. As sources of wealth and ownership, women partook in cultural expectations of women in the Bukusu community passing through rituals for life transitions such as childbirth, marriage, motherhood, old age, and death. Women were custodians of the family and clan social welfare including, caregiving, nurturing, wealth sources, ownership, and food security. They were instruments of cultural identity and heritage through their daily activities such as craftsmanship as part of their individual and collective economic contribution.

However, the study also established the changing nature of the same roles due to external influences such as colonialism, and Christianity, all of which amount to what is deemed modernization and globalization. This study brings a nuanced understanding of the intersection between culture, identity, and societal evolution, stressing the need for ongoing research to understand contemporary patterns of change in the traditional practices of Bukusu women.

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