

**NEGOTIATING CHANGE: MISSIONARY ENCOUNTERS AND
THE TRANSFORMATION OF WOMEN'S ROLES AMONG THE BUKUSU
IN BUNGOMA COUNTY, KENYA**

Damaris Simuli Werunga¹, & Gábor Biczó²

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Abstract

Although internal influences existed within Bukusu society, women largely remained stable within, and responsive to, established cultural expectations. However, exposure to external interventions, particularly Christian missionary activity, marked the beginning of new male and female role dynamics. This study examines the influence of Christian missionary activity on the roles of Bukusu women in Bungoma County, western Kenya, from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. It proceeds from the observation that many internal social transformations became more visible in the context of missionary encounter. Drawing on oral narratives, archival materials, secondary sources, and ethnographic interpretation, the study argues that missionary engagement with Bukusu society produced neither wholesale cultural rupture nor straightforward continuity. Rather, Bukusu women selectively appropriated missionary education, religious practices, and health interventions to renegotiate domestic authority, moral legitimacy, and social visibility. By foregrounding women's voices, the study demonstrates how missionary influence was mediated through locally embedded sex-based logics, kinship obligations, and moral economies, revealing a process of cultural negotiation rather than passive reception.

¹ Damaris Simuli Werunga (PhD student), University of Debrecen, Department of Ethnology, Debrecen (Hungary)(Kenya). E-mail wdamarissimuli@gmail.com ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4043-9250>

² Gábor, Biczó (Prof., Habil., PhD). University of Debrecen, Faculty of Education and Special Education, Department of Social Sciences, Debrecen (Hungary). E-mail biczo.gabor@ped.unideb.hu ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3797-3060>

was mediated through locally embedded sex-based logics, kinship obligations, and moral economies, revealing a process of cultural negotiation rather than passive reception.

Keywords: Bukusu women, Religious transformation, Women's agency, Christian missions, Kinship

Discipline: cultural anthropology

Absztrakt

A VÁLTOZÁS TÁRGYALÁSA: MISSZIONÁRIUSI TALÁLKOZÁSOK ÉS A NŐI SZEREPEK ÁTALAKULÁSA A KENYAI BUNGOMA MEGYÉBEN ÉLŐ BUKUSU KÖZÖSSÉG KÖRÉBEN

Noha a bukusu társadalmon belül is léteztek endogén hatóerők, a nők helyzete alapvetően stabil maradt, és nagyrészt a rögzült kulturális normákhoz való alkalmazkodás jellemezte. Mindazonáltal a külső beavatkozásoknak – különösen a keresztény misszionáriusi tevékenységnek – való kitettség új nemi szerepdinamikák kialakulását indította el. Jelen tanulmány a keresztény misszió hatását vizsgálja a bukusu nők társadalmi szerepeire Nyugat-Kenyában, Bungoma megyében, a 19. század végétől a 20. század közepéig terjedő időszakban. Elemzésünk kiindulópontja az a megfigyelés, hogy számos belső társadalmi átalakulás a misszionáriusi találkozás kontextusában vált különösen érzékelhetővé és artikulálhatóvá. A kutatás orális narratívákra, levéltári forrásokra, szekunder szakirodalomra, valamint etnográfiai interpretációra támaszkodva amellet érvel, hogy a misszionáriusi jelenlét nem eredményezett sem totális kulturális diszkontinuitást, sem pedig lineáris kontinuitást. Ehelyett a bukusu nők szelektív módon sajátították el és internalizálták a misszionáriusi oktatás, vallásgyakorlat és egészségügyi intervenciók elemeit, hogy újratárgyalják a háztartáson belüli autoritást, a morális legitimitációt és a társadalmi láthatóság kereteit. A női perspektívák előtérbe állításával a tanulmány rámutat arra, hogy a misszionáriusi hatás közvetítése lokálisan beágyazott nemi logikákon, rokonsági kötelezettségeken és morális gazdaságokon keresztül valósult meg, feltárva egy olyan kulturális tárgyalási folyamatot, amely aktív újraértelmezést, nem pedig passzív befogadást implikál.

Kulcsszavak: bukusu nők, vallási átalakulás, női cselekvőképesség, keresztény missziók, rokonsági rendszerek

Diszciplína: kulturális antropológia

Introduction

The Bukusu people inhabit Bungoma County, formerly Bungoma District, in Western Kenya. A number of them have since missionary and mainly after independence spread across other Counties such as Trans, Nzoia, Kakamega, and Vihiga. In pre-missionary times, these people lived in small communities made of villages, usually consisting of clans. A clan was the largest basic unit. To date, the Bukusu community is known to be one of the most culturally rich communities in Kenya. This owes to

its strict cultural observation and adherence to cultural practices such as death, initiation, and marriage rituals, among others. We would, in this case, use the term “culturality” to mean the strictness of cultural values and practice observation by the Bukusu. Therefore, the culture of the Bukusu people was put to the test upon its exposure to the external factors that were largely evident when the region experienced an influx of missionaries. However, before focusing on the influence of missionaries on the Bukusu, it is imperative to discuss the

roles of women in the community regarding spirituality in the Bukusu's traditional setting. This paper examines the influence of missionaries on the roles of women among the Bukusu people. Due to the scarcity of knowledge or scholarship on the presence of women's lived experiences at the time, we deemed it necessary to delve into unearthing the missing links and the silent voices of women in this historical phenomenon. While we understand that missionary activities and colonialism are intertwined, we treat them separately due to the fact that the former deals with social and moral frameworks, while the latter deals more with administrative matters, which are more political. Handling them separately offers a solid and comprehensive analysis of the sex-based and distinct experiences and responses to the interventions. This highlights the lived experiences of men and women who experienced this historical phenomenon. The study adopts an ethnographic research approach as its primary method of investigation through active participant observations, interviews, and discussions, informal conversations with interlocutors who, through their collective memories gives tales and accounts of the male and female role dynamics of the missionary activities. In addition, it makes use of secondary sources to corroborate the primary data. With a thick descriptive design, the study unravels the nuances in men's and women's feelings, expressions, reactions, and judgments from their experiences, with a distinct comparison with men's experiences.

Bukusu Male-Female Relations before Missionary Intervention

Before the missionary contact, Bukusu women's roles were anchored in subsistence production, child-rearing, and household organization. Although stateless, without a specialized common political organization, its authority was publicly male-centered; women exercised significant informal power through control of food resources, moral

regulation, and kinship mediation (Makila 1978; Nasimiyu, 1984). Other sources have pointed to the traditional spiritual practices that the Bukusu believed in the Supreme Being known as *Wele*. Also known as *Wele Khakaba (God the creator/ Provider)*, who was believed to be the creator of the world and men. *Wele* formed the top of a kind of hierarchy of ancestral spirits, who is *Wele* himself were helpers and protectors of the living (De Wolf, 1971). The ancestral spirits were a fundamental force in the well-being of the Bukusu society. They were a constant and compulsory frame of reference for all social activities. The belief in ancestral spirits was based on the concept of the Bukusu belief that there was life after death. Ancestor veneration was considered an intermediary between the dead and the living.

The key aspects of the Bukusu traditional worship included a Trinitarian view of God that consisted of *Wele Mukhobe, Wele Mwana, and Wele Murumwa*, comparable to the Biblical Trinity of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. However, they also believed that *Wele Kumali* (black god) was the benevolent creator, as the god of misfortunes and witchcraft. Meanwhile, the shrines were spaces of worship, prayers, and rituals. These shrines included rivers, springs, caves, and mountains. With regards to the obligation of women, the Bukusu women worshipped through practices such as ancestral veneration and mourning, where they played a crucial role in mourning rituals and ancestral worship. Often, they led in the wailing and lamentation during the funerals to appease the spirits (Wandibba, 2013). For instance, the widowhood rituals entailed women's cleansing ceremonies to signify the end of mourning and re-entry or reintegration into the community.

Communal and household rituals are particularly the roles reserved for Bukusu women. For instance, women played a key role in prayers and food preparations for traditional ceremonies such as *Khukhwingisia enju* (the house warming) ritual when a new

house had been built. The housewarming ritual, mainly, they would prepare *ugali* (corn or millet pounded meal and chicken stew). Since they were food security custodians, women were in charge of collective agricultural activities that included singing harvest songs. From this, it can be conceptualized that the Bukusu religion was generally a communal rather than an individualistic practice with women focusing on fostering social cohesion, maintaining food security, and ensuring cultural traditions continuity.

Traditional education of the Bukusu people was holistic, informal, and intertwined with daily living. The traditional education system of the Bukusu community during the period from 1850 to 1894 was deeply rooted in their cultural values and indigenous beliefs. The oral traditions and social mentorships were intended to prepare girls for womanhood, marriage, and household management, which were meant to fulfill their female roles in society. The informal system of education was largely practical, centered on child-rearing, caregiving, agriculture, and maintenance of family cohesion, and these were passed down through generations within home settings (Wilson & Ngige, 2006). For example, the traditional education through mentorship by the elderly women, where girls were mentored by their mothers, grandmothers, and other senior clan relatives. The essentials of life, such as morals, respect, and wifely and motherly responsibilities, were instilled. Having mentioned that education was practical, more or less an apprenticeship form of learning skills, girls learned by doing domestic tasks such as cooking, cultivating, cleaning, gathering food, and managing the home.

In addition, another essential part of traditional education was sexuality education, in which grandmothers guided girls about their sexuality, personal hygiene, and the importance of maintaining their virginity until marriage. This instruction was delivered mainly through songs, dances, and word-of-mouth mentorship by elderly

women, preparing girls for the emotional and physical aspects of adulthood. Since women lived and carried out most of their duties collectively, the knowledge of proper socialization and conduct needed to be passed down through oral tradition, ensuring that cultural values and expectations were preserved across generations. These comprised storytelling, folktales, and folklore that helped socialize girls into the community's cultural expectations (Moyia et al., 2023). In essence, this traditional education system of the Bukusu played a key role in passing down cultural values and sustaining the community's social structure with a focus on their role as mothers and wives.

As for the traditional healthcare system, the Bukusu women practiced it through a comprehensive, community-embedded system that creates a blend with herbal medicine, midwifery, spiritual care, and nutrition management. Owing to their responsibility as keepers of domestic knowledge, they were primarily in charge of the health of children, mothers, and the elderly. Bukusu elderly women often acted as herbalists who were rich in extensive knowledge of local plants, shrubs, and herbs used to treat ailments. The midwives (*nabweli*) managed pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal care. They offered care for mothers and newborns, including assistance with birth and providing specialized post-natal care to ensure the mother's health and the safety of the baby. They were in charge of nutrition and disease prevention through preparing nutritious foods such as sorghum, millet, and maize, as well as managing food security. With the communal responsibility of caregiving, women served as the primary caregivers for the sick within the family, tending to them until they recovered.

In this context, knowledge of healthcare was closely intertwined with spirituality rather than treated as a separate domain, and women actively participated in rituals, including those associated with caring for the deceased. Similar to traditional education, traditional medicinal knowledge was

acquired through apprenticeship and was often passed down from elderly women to younger generations. However, despite their central role in healing practices, certain cultural constraints existed. For instance, women who were breastfeeding or menstruating were forbidden from practicing, as it was believed that these conditions conflicted with the strict ritualistic and spiritual requirements of traditional medicine.

Introduction of the Missionary Interventions in Bukusuland

The onset of missionary activities in western Kenya and Bungoma regions, which was historically referred to as North Nyanza in the early 20th century, can be termed as complex, multifaceted, and pivotal. It brought rapid social, cultural, and political change. The missionary activities converged with spiritual, educational, health, and later colonial efforts that marked the beginning of transformations of the traditional way of life for the Bukusu people and their neighboring communities. These changes were tied to Western missionaries' perception on Africa native customs and traditions with abhorrence (Kaplan, 1986). Their mission was threefold in the sense that their role was not simply to preach; rather, they brought a holistic approach that is often known as Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization (Cs) (Sunquist, 2013). Furthermore, the 3Cs were evangelism through which they established churches to introduce a new monotheistic faith, largely focusing on converting people from traditional spiritual practices.

The Bukusu people had their traditional way of practicing their spirituality. However, this was deemed paganistic, and the missionaries were on a mission to have them abandon such practices (Hassan, 2015). On the other hand, it was difficult for them to convert people to Christianity, as local people were illiterate and thus needed education to teach them how to read, write, and perform

arithmetic, which was perceived as crucial for converting the local people. The missionaries faced challenges that included resistance, illiteracy, poverty, and diseases with a high mortality rate and poor health conditions (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2020). They introduced healthcare to offer modern medicine that, in some respects, helped improve health and reduce mortality, thereby gaining the local people's trust. Notwithstanding, Missionary activity formed one of the earliest sustained encounters between the Bukusu society and external power institutions. While cognizant that colonial administration formalized political domination, which is not the focus of this work, missionaries intervened more intimately in the day-to-day lives of women through education, health care, domestic instruction, and religious moralization. Missionary influences ensued within pre-existing complex sex-based systems rooted in kinship, age hierarchy, and moral obligation (Green & Kabata, 2021).

This text examines how missionary activities reshaped the roles of women without completely eroding the indigenous norms governing men and women in Bukusu society.

Rather than portraying women as passive recipients of missionary influence, it highlights them as active agents who interpreted, negotiated, and reworked new ideas within culturally meaningful frameworks. By centering oral narratives, the study recovers women's perspectives that are largely absent from missionary and colonial archives. In doing so, it builds on and moves beyond existing studies on Christianity in Africa and Kenya, which have often emphasized themes of conversion, resistance, or cultural disruption, by foregrounding women's lived experiences and agency within these transformative processes (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991; Hastings, 1994). However, such approaches risk obscuring women's lived experiences and interpretive agency. This article changes the analytical lens by mirroring Bukusu women as active cultural interlocutors, rather than passive subjects of missionary agendas.

Interplay between Religion, Education, Health Interventions, and Bukusu Women's Roles

Fundamentally, missionaries in Kenya were not always enthusiastically received once it became clear that they despised many aspects of African cultures and practices (Kanogo, 1994). The key argument here is that missionary influence among the Bukusu was filtered through pre-existing cultural norms and moral logics, resulting in selective adoption and hybridization. Women used missionary resources pragmatically to strengthen household welfare, moral authority, and social legitimacy, even as they resisted or reinterpreted teachings that conflicted with indigenous values. For instance, some oral narratives reveal that although women appreciated certain Christian ideals, such as individualized faith, this shift also contributed to the erosion of their socially and communally forged identities. In highlighting these tensions, this approach responds to the systematic absence of women's voices in missionary archives, which overwhelmingly privilege the perspectives of male converts, chiefs, and Europeans. Following Vansina (1985), oral traditions are therefore treated not as static records of the past, but as interpretive historical sources through which social experience is narrated, evaluated, and given meaning. Women's accounts are particularly valuable for accessing domains of domestic life, caregiving, and moral negotiation that were rarely documented in written sources. Referring to Portelli (1991), the oral narratives are analyzed not solely for factual reconstruction but for their symbolic and moral content. Women's recollections of mission schools, churches, and hospitals are embedded in broader reflections on respectability, hardship, and social change. Apparent inconsistencies are therefore understood as expressive rather than erroneous, revealing how women situate missionary encounters within longer life histories. Their experiences include their lived encounters at all stages of their lives.

The influence was not only reflected in adult women but also began in childhood. In fact, young girls were the best targets for conversion owing to the psychological fact that children are quick at learning. As opposed to boys, girls had limited enrolment as they were not given priority by the authority. This was reinforced by the preexisting traditional patriarchal system, where men are in control of every sphere of the community. Girls could access church, school, and training through social mobility by virtue of their relation with the male kin already enrolled (Ochwada, 2007). Those from a higher social status in the community were more privileged than those who were poor. The local leaders who helped in the recruitment also played a key role in determining girls and women who gained access to the church, school, and healthcare services. Nonetheless, girls who accessed education, for instance, attested to a rise in their social mobility, such as gaining employment in schools, hospitals, and churches (Ochwada, 2007). Even with that, young girls continued to get informal traditional teaching through apprenticeship from elderly women. This included cultural morals on marriage, sexuality, and their position in the family, clan, and community at large. For instance, while Christian teachings abhorred early marriages, the girls delayed marriage while seeking education (Adhiambo et al., 2022). The literacy skills gained from school were combined with the informal cultural teachings, creating a hybrid learning experience and adoption. Senior women were particularly influential as custodians of cultural knowledge and moral propriety (Taiwo, 2010). These pre-existing forms of authority shaped how missionary teachings were received, contested, or selectively integrated.

In the author's interaction with men and women from the Bukusu community, there were emerging themes that included gendered knowledge or education. On a general note, missionary education represented a key site of engagement with Bukusu women. While early schooling prioritized boys, girls'

education expanded gradually, often framed around domestic science, hygiene, and Christian morality (Harnes, 2014). Further, educational opportunities were expanded only insofar as women needed to provide fitting and accomplished marriage companions for educated men seeking to advance their careers in the new meritocratic society (Leach, 2008). Missionary discourse portrayed education as preparation for “Christian wifedom,” but women’s narratives reveal more ambivalent outcomes. An elderly woman respondent uttered that while the missionaries taught them how to read and pray, her mother told her that the essence was to know how to manage a home, and that she learned both. From her literacy, she attests that Western education enhanced women’s ability to engage with church activities, manage household resources, and participate in emerging social networks. Her revelations reveal that education thus extended women’s domestic authority rather than displacing it. Although their limited access indicates the selective nature based on the social cadre in which the girls and women came. This owes to other revelations pointing out their inability to attend school since no one advocated for them.

Seen in this light, from domestic authority extension, Christian conversion introduced new moral discourses that condemned Bukusu practices on marriage, such as polygyny, indigenous rituals, and certain gendered practices (Shamba, 2022). While missionaries framed these reforms as universal moral truths, women’s narratives reflect selective compliance. Case in point was a woman in her 90s, who illuminated that the church ruled that some customs were sinful, but people knew which ones protected the family, and they followed God and their customs. For example, rituals such as those surrounding marriages are important to date (Alber et al., 2008). Equally, church spaces comprising choirs, women’s fellowships, and prayer groups provided women with new platforms for collective identity and moral leadership. Synthetically, these spaces

became important arenas for female visibility, even as formal ecclesiastical authority remained male-dominated.

In addition, the missionary health initiatives engaged women directly as mothers, caregivers, and reproductive subjects (Thomas, 2003). Clinics and maternity services were often welcomed for addressing childbirth complications, yet women did not abandon indigenous medical knowledge. Although some women expressed their dissatisfaction, citing a lack of agency in offering practical traditional forms of health knowledge due to the perception that their practices were harmful, they were confident in the African traditional values, which, accordingly, are implicitly religious (Obuhatsa, 2000). While some pointed out that their freedom of communal healthcare was infringed upon when healthcare services were centralized and individualized, others expressed their satisfaction that it helped reduce the infant mortality rate and improved maternal health. From one of the respondents, it was noted that whenever birth was difficult, women went to the hospital. Although elders still guided us at home, they needed both traditional and modern healthcare. From this revelation, we infer that indeed, Bukusu women acted as brokers of medical pluralism, integrating biomedical and indigenous practices within household care systems. Further, their admissions corroborate that indeed, the Christian missionary movement provided both opportunities and challenges for socially conscious women (Prevost, 2008)

From field observations, the narratives pointed to domesticity, discipline, and gendered negotiation where missionary promotion of Christian domesticity reshaped ideals of cleanliness, obedience, and female modesty. Having imposed new forms of discipline, it appears that women mobilized Christian respectability creatively and strategically to enhance their moral position. This suggests that Christian identity could function as a resource for negotiation, rather than a simple mechanism of control, as several sources indicate. Alongside this, the experiences

of men and women who have lived through generations from the missionary epoch to the contemporary times show a generational variation and the temporal layering of the missionary influence (Webb, 2024). For some elderly men and women, missionary engagements were intrusive but valuable, whereas the younger generations, mostly the millennial generation, who have experienced modern formal schooling and church life, perceive it as a pathway to social mobility. On the contrary, Generation Zs are selective on religion, with the majority pointing to individual spirituality as opposed to neither traditional nor modern religions.

Building on the preceding discussion, the Bukusu case exemplifies missionary influence unfolding through selective acculturation and cultural appropriation, consequently, producing hybrid gender roles. Women neither rejected nor uncritically adopted missionary teachings; in their place, they reworked them within indigenous moral economies, thereby demonstrating that since the 19th century, there has always been a conflict between indigenous and exotic (western) values and institutions in African societies (Nduka, 1980). This supports broader anthropological arguments that cultural change under missionization is dialogic and gendered rather than linear (Bhaba, 2012; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). About religion and women's roles, this paper establishes the commitment of women to the inculturation and negotiation, incorporating certain indigenous practices into worship and developing culturally relevant religious activities, finding that this is in tandem with that of Armstrong (2025). Bukusu women depict their cultural sensitivity in their religious practices. Just like Viera (2007) avers that adoption of Christianity and the process of cultural exchange were shaped by African choices, needs, and efforts to Africanize Africa's Christian experience by securing the roots of Christianity in the African context. In this vein, the Bukusu women made personal choices in how they practiced their roles in the midst of missionary interventions.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the missionary engagements in the Bukusu society reshaped women's roles in complex and ambivalent ways. Unlike habitual perception, women were not passive recipients of missionary agendas; they were active agents who negotiated new ideas within existing moral and social frameworks. Education expanded domestic competence, church spaces enabled collective female identity, and health initiatives intersected with indigenous caregiving practices owing to their preexisting traditional cumulative body of knowledge on health, while professional trainings empowered a fraction of women while constraining another. These institutions acted as spaces of socialization for women where others gained access to employment and social mobility, though the very access remained uneven and controlled. This article establishes that Bukusu women played a key role in mediating missionary influence, ensuring cultural continuity while accommodating change. The oral narratives divulge missionary engagement as a dialogic process, shaped as much by women's agency as by institutional intent. There are instances of women's agency being enabled in one way while limited in another.

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