

The Nature of Bukusu Traditional / Indigenous System of Education, 1850 - 1894

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Abstract: *This paper explores the nature of the traditional education system among the Bukusu community during the period from 1850 to 1894. It delves into the social, economic, and political organization of the Bukusu society, highlighting their geographical context and gender equity. Furthermore, the paper examines the philosophical foundations of Bukusu education, focusing on indigenous beliefs, values, and worldviews that shaped the educational framework. It discusses the multifaceted purposes and goals of Bukusu education, emphasizing its role in transmitting knowledge, values, ethics, and cultural identity. The paper expounds on the significant role of spirituality and ritual in education and outlines the methods of knowledge transmission, such as oral traditions, mentorship, and initiation rituals. It provides an overview of the curriculum and subjects taught, which encompassed practical skills, vocational training, and cultural heritage preservation. Finally, the paper explores student life and experiences within Bukusu education, highlighting the holistic and experiential approach to learning.*

Keywords: Bukusu, traditional education, indigenous education, cultural identity, knowledge transmission, spirituality, ritual, curriculum, mentorship, gender equity.

1. Introduction

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. This paper explores various aspects of the Bukusu traditional education system, including its philosophical foundations, methods of knowledge transmission, curriculum, student life, and its role in preserving cultural identity.

Societal and Educational Facets of the Bukusu People Social, Economic, and Political Organization

The Bukusu society during the period from 1850 to 1894 was marked by a well - defined social, economic, and political structure that played pivotal roles in governing the community and resolving conflicts. This organization was fundamental to the cohesion and stability of the Bukusu people, and it is crucial to delve deeper into each aspect of this organization.

In pre - colonial times, the Bukusu society demonstrated a unique and well - structured political organization characterized by distinct leadership hierarchies, governance systems, and mechanisms for resolving conflicts (Iliffe, 1979). At the grassroots level, the village elders, known as "Vakabaragania," played a pivotal role in decision - making and conflict resolution. These elders, respected for their wisdom and deep - rooted connection to the community's traditions, presided over village meetings and assemblies, ensuring that discussions remained focused and aligned with the community's values (Waswa, 2004). Beyond their administrative roles, the Vakabaragania served as trusted mediators and advisors in dispute resolution, contributing to the maintenance of harmony and order within the community.

Above the village elders were the clan leaders, referred to as "Vakoya," who served as intermediaries between individual

clans and the broader community (Waswa, 2004). They played a crucial role in preserving the cohesion, values, and traditions of the Bukusu people, safeguarding their clan's unique cultural identity and customs. The Vakoya actively transmitted their clan's oral history, rituals, and rites to successive generations, ensuring the continuity of their heritage (Iliffe, 1979). Balancing clan - specific interests with the overall unity of the Bukusu people was a delicate task for the Vakoya, but it allowed diverse clans to coexist harmoniously within the community.

At the pinnacle of Bukusu governance was the council of clan leaders, representing the highest authority (Iliffe, 1979). Comprising representatives from each clan, this council emphasized inclusivity, ensuring that decisions considered the diverse perspectives and interests of various clans. Matters of great significance, such as land allocation and conflict resolution, were thoroughly discussed and collectively decided upon within this council. This multi - tiered leadership structure distributed power, maintained checks and balances, and held leaders accountable for their actions, contributing to a cohesive and harmonious community (Waswa, 2004).

The council of clan leaders also had a profound responsibility in preserving the Bukusu cultural heritage, ensuring that traditions, customs, and values remained vibrant across generations (Spencer, 1965). Their commitment to inclusive governance, community - centric decision - making, and the preservation of tradition continues to influence the social and political dynamics of the Bukusu community. In essence, the pre - colonial Bukusu political organization's well - defined leadership structures and governance systems, along with effective conflict resolution mechanisms, were instrumental in maintaining stability, fairness, and representation within the society (Iliffe, 1979).

With immense talent, the Babukusu were a strong military force feared beyond hills and valleys. Besides, the community was always in command of accomplished military commanders who triumphantly steered them at war time. The few available history rememberers give notable figures such as “*Mukisu Lufwalula (Omuyemba), Mukite wa Nameme (Omumutilu), Wangamati wa Wabwile (Omukipemuli), Maelo wa Khaindi (Omulunda), Wakoli khwa Mukisu (Omuyemba), Kikiyi wa Weswa (Omubuulo), Lumbasi we Kangabasi (Omutecho) and Wele wa Kasawa (Omukimweyi)*” (Mr John, interview, 7 January 2018).

“The community was endowed with a rare crop of diviners, future tellers and medicine men and women that gave the critical advice on war. They gave a final word such as postponing wars or giving the greenlight for the mission. Since they could foretell events, their blessings were crucial to the success of the battle. Dominant names here include such as Mutonyi wa Nabukelembe (Omuyitu), Maina wa Nalukale (Omukitang’a), Sing’uru (Omumuki), Wachiye wa Naumbwa (Omukwangwa), Khakula (Omumeme) and lately Elijah wa Nameme and Joash wa Lumoli” (Mr John, interview, 7 January 2018).

Throughout their migration patterns, Babukusu would encounter many communities who would end up being allies or rivals. Struggle for resources was the central reason why wars happened in the day. Traditionally, Omubukusu was omwayi and omulimi (crop - grower and animal keeper). It’s why in some biilayo (oaths), some clans refer to themselves as ‘Efwe babaayi be Silikwa’ or ‘Babaayi be Embayi’ (We descend from our ancestor who kept lots of cattle at Silikwa/Embayi). Additionally, Omubukusu would grow traditional vegetables such as esaka and enderema among others while keeping cattle, sheep, goats and chicken.

Gender Equity

The research emphasized the importance of gender equity in understanding the Bukusu community. Both female and male participants contributed to a holistic understanding of the community, reflecting the balanced roles and contributions of women in Bukusu society.

This finding is consistent with information collected through interviews from key informants and opinion leaders. They opined the following: “

.... In the traditional education system of the Bukusu community, gender roles were clearly defined and played out within the family structure. Boys and girls were instructed on their respective responsibilities with the guidance of their grandmothers for girls and grandfathers for boys. This gender - specific education was primarily conveyed through an informal system, imparting essential life skills. For girls, their education primarily focused on domestic roles and responsibilities. Under the guidance of their grandmothers, girls were taught how to cook and efficiently manage household chores. These practical skills were considered vital for their future roles as wives and homemakers. Girls learned not only the culinary arts but also the intricacies of maintaining a well - kept household.

Conversely, boys received education from their grandfathers, who instilled in them a different set of skills and knowledge. Their education revolved around activities related to hunting and survival. Boys were taught how to master the art of hunting, tracking, and navigating the natural environment. These skills were crucial for their roles as providers and protectors within the community. (Mr Kelvin Wamalwa, interview, 7 January 2018)

Philosophical Foundations of Bukusu Education

The traditional education system of the Bukusu people was deeply intertwined with their indigenous beliefs and worldviews (Wamalwa, 2012). This connection influenced the entire educational framework, curriculum, and teaching methods. Central to this education was the Bukusu belief in the interconnectedness of all aspects of life, including the living, ancestors, and the natural world. This worldview shaped their educational approach, emphasizing the importance of harmonious relationships within the community and with the spiritual realm and the environment. Education, from the Bukusu perspective, was a means of instilling values like respect, responsibility, and reciprocity with both the living and ancestral spirits (Waswa, 2004).

Education among the Bukusu was not just about imparting practical skills and knowledge but also about nurturing ethical values, a profound sense of cultural identity, and spiritual awareness. The overarching goals of education were seamlessly integrated into community life, emphasizing the holistic development of individuals. Holistic development was at the core of Bukusu education, with the primary aim of preparing individuals to lead responsible and meaningful lives within the community. This encompassed practical skills, ethical values, and spiritual consciousness.

Furthermore, education sought to instill a strong sense of cultural identity and belonging in learners. It was designed to ensure that each individual understood their role within the community, respected its customs and traditions, and made positive contributions to the collective welfare.

Spirituality and rituals played a significant role in the educational journey of Bukusu learners (Iliffe, 1979). These rituals were not mere ceremonies but held deep educational significance, marking important life transitions, initiations, and the acquisition of specific knowledge. They served as conduits for spiritual growth and moral development, particularly during significant life transitions like the shift from childhood to adulthood. These ceremonies were not just symbolic but were viewed as opportunities for individuals to connect with the spiritual world and ancestral spirits.

Elders and spiritual leaders played pivotal roles in guiding learners through these rituals, imparting wisdom, cultural knowledge, and essential moral values necessary for becoming responsible members of the community.

Methods of Knowledge Transmission of Education among the Bukusu

The heart of Bukusu education lay in oral tradition, where elders and storytellers transmitted knowledge, history, and cultural narratives through rich storytelling (Spencer, 1965). These narratives were more than mere stories; they served as vessels of wisdom, moral teachings, and cultural preservation.

Oral Narratives: Story telling went beyond entertainment; it played a vital role in preserving the collective memory of the Bukusu people. Through narratives, myths, legends, and folktales, the community's history, values, and cultural identity were passed down through generations.

These stories often carried moral lessons, teaching the youth not only about their heritage but also about ethics and proper behavior.

Preservation of Cultural Identity: Oral traditions were instrumental in safeguarding Bukusu cultural identity. They conveyed the customs, rituals, and norms that defined the community.

Elders, as custodians of this oral heritage, ensured that the younger generation absorbed these cultural narratives and comprehended their significance in the broader context of Bukusu society.

Elders and Mentorship: In the education of Bukusu youth, elders, known as "Vakabaragania" and mentors played pivotal roles (Wamalwa, 2012). Their guidance, wisdom, and mentorship were foundational in shaping the character and knowledge of the younger generation. This intergenerational knowledge transfer was a cornerstone of Bukusu education. Elders and mentors not only provided knowledge but also imparted valuable life lessons. Their role extended beyond mere instruction; they offered guidance on ethics, values, and responsibilities within the community. This mentorship instilled a deep respect for elders and a commitment to upholding the Bukusu way of life.

Interactive Learning: Learning in Bukusu society was characterized by meaningful interactions and dialogues between generations. Elders engaged the youth in discussions, answered questions, and addressed their curiosities. This interactive approach allowed for a profound understanding of cultural norms and practices.

Initiation Rituals: Initiation rituals marked significant educational milestones in the lives of Bukusu learners (Waswa, 2004). These rites of passage were not only ceremonial but also held profound educational value. They symbolized the transition from one stage of life and learning to another, instilling responsibilities, values, and cultural knowledge. Initiation rituals were transformative experiences signaling the shift from childhood to adulthood, where individuals assumed new responsibilities within the community. Through these rituals, young Bukusu were prepared for adulthood, marriage, and community leadership. Initiation ceremonies served as repositories of

cultural knowledge, teaching participants about their history, traditions, and their roles in society. These rites reinforced the importance of cultural preservation and identity, ensuring the continuity of the Bukusu way of life across generations.

Curriculum and Subjects in Bukusu Education

The Bukusu education curriculum was comprehensive, designed to meet the practical needs of the community while preserving their cultural heritage (Waswa, 2004). It covered a wide array of subjects and skills, emphasizing the holistic development of Bukusu learners.

Diverse Subjects: The curriculum encompassed a broad spectrum of subjects, reflecting the holistic nature of Bukusu education. Subjects included agriculture, herbal medicine, craftsmanship, storytelling, history, and traditional governance systems (Wamalwa, 2012). This diversity ensured that learners were well - rounded and capable of contributing to various aspects of community life.

Agricultural Focus: Agriculture was fundamental in the Bukusu curriculum. Learners were taught practical skills related to cultivating staple crops like maize, millet, and beans (Iliffe, 1979). This training covered soil preparation, planting, crop maintenance, and harvesting, ensuring food security and preserving agricultural traditions.

Herbal Medicine: The curriculum included traditional herbal medicine education. Learners were trained to identify and use medicinal plants (Spencer, 1965). This knowledge was essential for community health and emphasized the interconnectedness of nature and culture in Bukusu society.

Craftsmanship Skills: Craftsmanship was integral to the curriculum, with a focus on skills such as blacksmithing, pottery, and beadwork (Waswa, 2004). Learners acquired the art of crafting tools, ornaments, and utensils, promoting self - sufficiency and preserving the Bukusu tradition of craftsmanship.

Cultural Preservation: Beyond practical skills, Bukusu education was a means of preserving cultural heritage and identity (Wamalwa, 2012). Subjects like storytelling and history intertwined with customs, values, and traditions. Learners gained a deep understanding of cultural norms, respect for elders, communal living, and spiritual beliefs.

In essence, Bukusu education instilled pride in cultural heritage and a commitment to traditions, ensuring the continuity of Bukusu identity in a changing world. The curriculum provided a diverse range of subjects and skills that empowered learners to thrive in daily life while safeguarding their cultural heritage and identity.

Student Life and Experiences in Bukusu Education

Bukusu education was deeply integrated into daily life, following a structured age - graded approach marked by initiation ceremonies (Iliffe, 1979). These ceremonies were both rites of passage and educational milestones, imparting

essential knowledge and cultural values.

Western Kenya. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2 (22), 101 - 113.

Age - Graded Stages: The education system consisted of distinct age - graded stages, with learners advancing through initiation ceremonies (Wamalwa, 2012). These ceremonies signified readiness for new responsibilities and roles within the community.

Integral to Communal Living: Education was an integral part of communal life (Spencer, 1965). Learners lived with their families and actively participated in household and community activities. Daily tasks like farming, cooking, and craftsmanship provided practical learning opportunities.

Guidance by Elders and Mentors: Elders and mentors played a crucial role in learners' lives, offering guidance, sharing wisdom, and facilitating hands - on learning experiences (Iliffe, 1979). This mentorship was continuous and interactive.

Initiation Ceremonies: Initiation ceremonies were pivotal events, involving rigorous training, rituals, and tests of knowledge and courage (Wamalwa, 2012). Successful completion marked the transition to the next educational stage and adulthood.

Holistic Learning: Education was seamlessly integrated into daily experiences (Spencer, 1965). Whether tending to livestock, participating in communal work, or engaging in cultural practices, learners were continually exposed to educational experiences.

In summary, Bukusu education was holistic, deeply intertwined with daily life, and structured around age - graded stages and initiation ceremonies. It ensured the transmission of knowledge, values, and traditions within the Bukusu community.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, the traditional education system of the Bukusu community from 1850 to 1894 was characterized by its deep - rooted cultural values, oral traditions, and practical skills. It played a pivotal role in preserving the community's cultural identity while equipping learners with essential knowledge and skills. The holistic approach to education, with a focus on mentorship and initiation rituals, reflected the interconnectedness of education with all aspects of Bukusu life.

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