

# Not My Brother's Keeper: Forces That Have Kept the Luyia People Apart

The Luyia community has produced more vice presidents than any other Kenyan community. Musalia Mudavadi was appointed vice president in 2002 for 90 days, Wamalwa Kijana in 2003 for seven months and Moody Awori was also Mwai Kibaki's vice president between 2003 and 2007. But has this ever translated into any political clout or force? That has always been the big question of the day.

Luyias have never been able to take advantage of their numbers to gain or forge strong, collective political mileage. They have been unable to put their eggs in one basket to negotiate for their community. To understand the story of the Luyias of Kenya, one has to analyse their history from pre-colonial days to date, and particularly the impact of colonial events, ideology and administration.

Before the Luyia nation was cobbled together as a political necessity in 1943, several Luyia clans, such as the Bukusu, Banyala, Batsotso, Idakho, Isukha Kisa, Marama and Wanga, were originally Luo, Kalenjin or Masaai. In fact, a whole community like the Tachoni was originally part of the highland Nilotes who were incorporated through inter-marriage with the Bantu. This history does not make any of the clans less Luyia. Indeed, the entire community is an amalgamation of Bantu and Nilotic genealogy, bound by a common linguistic and cultural orientation acquired through adoption or assimilation. There are more than 800 Luyia clans to date, existing as units with fluid boundaries, joined together by a thin mosaic band of cultural and linguistic similarities.

*Before the Luyia nation was cobbled together as a political necessity in 1943, several Luyia clans, such as the Bukusu, Banyala, Batsotso, Idakho, Isukha Kisa, Marama and Wanga, were originally Luo, Kalenjin or Masaai. In fact, a whole community like the Tachoni was originally part of the highland Nilotes who were incorporated through inter-marriage with the Bantu.*

The political union between these clans has eluded them since the formation of the word "Abaluyia" in 1943. In essence, Luyia ethnicity did not exist before then.

British ethnographers called all tribes in western Kenya “Kavirondos”, a pejorative term resented by the Luyia, Luo, Kalenjin, Kisii, Kuria, and Teso. The fight by these communities to redeem their respective ethnic pride was somewhat achieved when the name Kavirondo was expunged from official use and replaced by “Nyanza”, which in some Luyia dialects means “a large water body”. What we refer to as Western Kenya was then called North Nyanza.

Most of these clans that shared closely related ethnic polity did not have a centralised system of traditional governance. Around the Second World War, traditional leaders in pre-colonial Kenya realised the world had changed, and with it political parameters. Only organised societies with definite ethnic identities could survive and possibly benefit politically by bandying together. The so-called Luyia communities were not spared the effects of this political idea.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the word Luyia was first proposed by the local African Mutual Assistance Association in 1930 and adopted by the North Kavirondo Central Association in 1935, although some sub-communities’ elders rejected it. Their opposition gradually waned and the name started gaining currency.

In 1940, the Abaluyia Welfare Association was born, partly to popularise the name “Abaluyia” as a first step to creating a super ethnic identity. Shortly afterwards, a language committee was formed, and following its recommendations in 1943, the Luyia nation was born. It was formally adopted to describe a federation of lexically- related Bantu sub-tribes as a distinct tribal group living in the western part of Kenya.

According to Shadrack Bulimo, a Kenya-born ethnographer based in Edmonton Canada, “midwifing the super tribe was the easy bit; nurturing and developing socio-cultural institutions to anchor an impregnable system with national ethos, has evaded Abaluyia tribesmen for three generations. Over the years, talk of Luyia unity has waxed and waned depending on prevailing political temperatures, in a cyclical pattern that continues even today especially during electioneering.”

“Luyia unity is a favourite subject among politicians whenever elections are looming, but the same leaders are unwilling to jump into one political vehicle to harmonise the region’s socio-economic interests,” Bulimo argues.

## Origins

The word Luyia is derived from *Oluyia* (the variation being *Oluhya*), which generically means a fireplace or hearth. It is believed that in pre-colonial Luyialand, members of a family, lineage or clan congregated around a bonfire in the evening to exchange the day's news, or simply tell stories about war or clan matters. If a stranger joined them, they would ask, "Which *Oluyia* do you belong to?" to establish where the person was from in order to guard against threatening strangers or enemy infiltration.

Besides a family hearth, each clan had a common village gathering place where elders assembled to honour a village summon. This way, *Oluyia* also served as a village court where important matters were discussed, argued and adjudicated. It derived a different meaning but for a similar purpose. The village's largest tree replaced the individual family's hearth and became the focal point of *Oluyia* during the day. Gradually, when people said they were going for a meeting at *Oluyia* they meant the village common ground, rather than the literal fireplace. (Note the spelling of the word "*Oluyia*" without the "h". The first Arabs encountered by Luyias are to blame for being unable to pronounce the word "Luyia" hence corrupting it by adding the letter "h" in their writing. Eventually, the new spelling came to be and was gradually adopted by scholars.)

*The word Luyia is derived from Oluyia (the variation being Oluhya), which generically means a fireplace or hearth. It is believed that in pre-colonial Luyialand, members of a family, lineage or clan congregated around a bonfire in the evening to exchange the day's news, or simply tell stories about war or clan matters.*

The other meaning of *Oluyia* is both micro and macro. Those who share a fireplace as a lineage or clan belong to the same *Oluyia* (micro meaning). Thus when a group of clans come together they form *Aba-luyia* (sub-tribe) or *Aba-luyia* (macro-tribe). Nowadays the Abaluyia or Luhya generally means people who speak any of the closely-related 18 dialects found in Busia, Kakamega, Bungoma and Vihiga counties.

However, this group of 18 related nations have had distinct experiences under colonialism, and specifically under the various Christian missions. The missionary church played a huge role in the politics of the Luyia community and in the

developments and cleavages of Luyia identity.

The Kenya-Uganda Railway reached Kisumu (then known as Port Florence) in 1901. Two years later, the Quakers (Friends Mission) started a mission hospital and primary school at Kaimosi in Tiriki. The Quakers would quickly become dominant in the area because, apart from evangelising, they introduced vocational training that imparted employable skills like carpentry, tailoring, masonry and machining to the natives.

A defining moment in the political history of Luyias had just been established. And somehow, the seed of discord among the community had also been sowed.

In the early 20th century, the various missionary societies active in the area concluded that competition for native souls was unhealthy and confusing, so they agreed to carve out spheres of jurisdiction in the region, just like during the “Scramble for Africa” when European powers did the same.

Under this pact, the Church Missionary Society - later called Church of the Province of Kenya (CPK) and today the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) - was assigned to evangelise among the Luo and the Marama. The Church of God was assigned Bunyore, Kisa and Butso. Friends African Mission (Quakers), with its headquarters in Kaimosi, was assigned Maragoli, Bukusu and Tiriki. Catholics were to concentrate on Wanga, Isukha and Idakho; the Mill Hill Fathers - also Catholic - anchored their mission at Mukumu in Isukha. The Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG) from Ontario, Canada, through Otto Keller, later established the mission at Nyangori. (Nyang’ori is located about 15km from Kisumu at the confluence of Nyanza, Rift Valley and Western Province.) Keller soon became very popular because he introduced drumming, which attracted locals to his church and annoyed Quakers who were already dominant in the area.

*In the early 20th century, the various missionary societies active in the area concluded that competition for native souls was unhealthy and confusing, so they agreed to carve out spheres of jurisdiction in the region, just like during the “Scramble for Africa” when European powers did the same.*

The Church Missionary Society (Anglicans) started a mission at Maseno, led by James Jamieson Willis and Hugh Saville, to preach to the Luo people. Maseno School later developed into one of the best centres of academic excellence in

Kenya. Having been established at a borderline, many neighbouring Luyia boys were enrolled into the mission alongside Luos. After all, inter-marriage between the Luo and Luyia had existed along the Maseno borderline.

The British appointed Nabongo Mumia as paramount chief of the region in 1913. Nabongo Mumia acquired the first bicycle in 1910, making him the first Luyia to do so, and since then, the item has remained a precious possession amongst the Luyias. Mumia was also the first Luyia to own a motor car. He retired in 1926 and died in 1949 aged 100 years, and was buried at Itokho in Mumias. The first sewing machine was introduced in 1916 by the Singer Company, which sold it to the Irish CMS Missionary at Butere. Modernity or “civilization” had arrived in Luyialand.

The Bukusu were the only Luyia community to openly resist the colonialists in 1895. They built Chetambe Fort in Webuye to reinforce their battle with the white man. The British fought back their warriors in 1895, ending the Bukusu resistance. To date, Bukusus perceive themselves as brave warriors.

## **The Quakers and their mission**

Islam was also present in Luyialand, and was brought to Wanga by Arab traders en route to Buganda in 1902. Beyond Wanga, there was little success in spreading the religion to the rest of Luyialand. Since Swahilis raided Bukusus for slaves, they met stiff resistance and hence few Bukusu converted to Islam. In Nabongo Mumia’s court, the Swahili occupied an envious position in the colonial administration. They were employed as tax collectors, informers and circumcisers of Wanga Muslims convertees, despite being associated with cunningness and corrupt practices. Today many Luyias refer to Abawanga as *Abaswahili* (implying cunning and untrustworthy people).

But it was the American Quakers Mission, which was dominant in the area, that became the site of major social transformation. The mission at Kaimosi was situated on a hill called Hill of Vision, which the locals referred to as *Javujilachi* (holy hill). The Quakers’ vision was premised on four pillars: education, health, industry and evangelism. Their arrival marked a radical approach that was different from that of earlier evangelists who only preached the gospel without investing in vocational and educational infrastructure.

Kaimosi was established in Tiriki where believers did not initially resist the

American missionaries. (They especially enjoyed and appreciated the health facilities.) Yet things took a turn for the worse when the Quakers began to question the traditional Tiriki way of life. The backlash was so severe that by 1910, only eleven Tirikis remained as converts. With time, the missionary efforts were combined with other colonial instruments like schooling, waged labour, taxation, property laws and urbanisation. Christianity disrupted traditional social practices like marriage and circumcision.

*But it was the American Quakers Mission...that became the site of major social transformation. The mission at Kaimosi was situated on a hill called Hill of Vision, which the locals referred to as Javujilachi (holy hill). The Quakers' vision was premised on four pillars: education, health, industry and evangelism.*

The Tirikis found themselves in a deep quagmire when their land was forcefully acquired by the missionaries, and when their culture was maligned and disrupted. They coexisted as uneasy neighbours with the Quakers, who they now disliked for their stand on polygamy and traditional culture. It meant that other Luyia communities gradually found refuge at the Kaimosi mission. Girls who sought refuge after running away from forceful suitors arrived at Kaimosi. Another sticking point was the presence of many non-Tiriki, especially Maragoli, as workers to the missionaries. This fostered the feeling that the mission favoured "outsiders".

Where the Tiriki lost, the Maragoli gained. With a huge population occupying a small area, they migrated in droves to live among the Tiriki in Kaimosi, becoming a sizeable minority. As early as 1904, the Maragoli made up the majority labour force at Kaimosi, a trend that has continued to date.

At this point, Kaimosi was the only intermediate school in Luyialand where the rest of the sub-clans had to go for education past Standard 3. On arrival, they came face to face with the perceived Maragoli dominance at the mission, which caused resentment. Led by the Bukusu, the other communities felt that they were "there to be seen and not to be heard". Most of the leading schools in Luyialand were either established or affiliated to Quakers; these included the Musingu, Kaimosi and Lugulu schools. However, the first government school (Kakamega High School) was built in 1932.

In any case, the Maragoli were the first Luyia to take advantage of the new

economic and social opportunities presented by colonialism. They were among the first to join schools, so the Quakers found it easier to work with them as opposed to the Tiriki. Consequently, the Quakers, led by Emory Rees and his wife Deborah, arrived at Vihiga from South Africa, and between 1903 and 1926 they learnt the Maragoli language and translated the Bible and school texts. This made conversion to Christianity among the Maragoli much easier. To date, most Christian hymnals among the Luyia are written and sung in their language.

The Maragoli started drifting from their traditional ways after 1910 with the arrival and influence of the Quakers. They for instance gradually started to drift from traditional circumcision ceremonies altogether, preferring western medical practices. Their purview of customary belief systems also changed dramatically. Conversion to Christianity or adoption of Western values had no negative social backlash among them. Maragolis, hence, became the first amongst equals in the eyes of the missionaries and other Luyias.

In Kaimosi, the Quakers mission would gain even more prominence in 1927 when it was the centre of a Pentecostal revivalist rebellion led by native Africans. The discontent simmered until the missionaries met with rebels and they had no choice but to expel some members who went ahead to establish the African Spiritual Church (*Dini Ya Roho*). In 1942, Daudi Zakayo Kivuli also founded his own church: The African Israel Nineveh Church. He installed his wife Rebecca as the High Priestess and when she died in 1983, her grandson John Mweresa Kivuli, took over as the current High Priest. Their followers are noted for wearing white turbans.

In 1946, Dini Ya Musambwa (Religion of Ancestral Spirits) was established by Elijah Masinde as a protest movement against Christian churches, which preached against ancestral sacrifices and polygamy. The Bukusu revere him as a prophet (*omung'osi*). In 1957 another splinter group led by Saulo Chabuga formed the African Divine Church in Maragoli. By 2008 they had around 25,000 churches spread out in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

After several misunderstandings and clamour for autonomy, the Kaimosi Quakers transferred the boys' school from the Tiriki and Maragoli to the Bukusu, renaming it Friends School Kamusinga in the heart of Bukusuland in Kimilili. The seeds of future disunity were planted by that simple action. Bukusus started seeing themselves as equal to Maragolis, at least on the education (read civilisation)

front.

Meanwhile, the Catholic missionaries tolerated local customs like polygamy, drinking alcohol and dancing at funerals. Locals in Isukha and Idakho who wanted to continue with this way of life found refuge amongst the Catholics, who did not condemn these practices too loudly. When they tried to replicate their success in Maragoli, they met stiff resistance – the Maragoli were already firmly embedded with the Quakers. The only Catholic mission arrived in the form of Maragoli Girls' Secondary School at Mbale set up by Mill Hill Missionaries, and this was as late as 1971.

The Tiriki resistance to Christianity was finally broken when Chief Paul Amiani joined the Salvation Army in 1932, and by the sheer force of his personality built strong followers, offering the much-needed alternative to Quaker dominance. Through him, the Tiriki elders accepted their youth to undergo both Christian and traditional initiation ceremonies. They also embraced education as an engine for personal and economic development. But as they did this, the horse (read Maragoli) had already bolted with the diadem of “modernity”.

In fact, when the idea of forming an “Abaluyia” identity was mooted in 1943, resistance came from the Maragoli community, who made it known to all and sundry that the Maragoli were not part of the Luyia nation – they were simply Maragoli. Nevertheless, the Maragoli never formally or officially asked for the name to be expunged from the list of communities that form the Luyia nation, leaving them firmly included.

## **Pulling apart**

Culturally, attempts to have what is often referred to as spoken standard Luyia have often hit a snag because no single dialect is understood by all sub-communities. Still, those who live in close geographical proximity tend to understand each other more easily, creating a pattern which can be sub-divided into four cluster areas: Cluster one – Logooli, Nyole, Tiriki; Cluster two – Isukha, Idakho, Kisa, Wang'a, Batsotso and Marama; Cluster three – Bukusu, Tachoni, Kabras, Abanyala (Kakamega); and Cluster four – Samia, Marachi, Abakhayo, Abanyala (Busia). According to scholar Abraham Mirimo, “all Luyia dialects share a core lexical structure and only minor inflection in suffixation and prefixation divided them”.

Talk of Luyia unity and two groups strongly come to mind - the Bukusu and the Maragoli, who are always believed to be pulling apart. Is it a coincidence that they are also the most migratory and daring of all Luyia sub-nations? Sample this. The Bukusu are mainly found in Bungoma and Trans-Nzoia. They are the most populous of the Luyia sub-nations, forming about 20 per cent of the estimated six million Luyia population. (The name Bungoma is derived from Bongamek, a Kalenjin tribe that originally occupied the territory.) In the 10th Parliament, they had seven MPs representing their domiciled interest in Kanduyi, Bumula, Webuye, Sirisia, Kimilili, Tongaren, Kwanza and Saboti. Their presence is spread out and overlaps into Trans-Nzoia, Kakamega and Uasin Gishu counties.

*Culturally, attempts to have what is often referred to as spoken standard Luyia have often hit a snag because no single dialect is understood by all sub-communities. Still, those who live in close geographical proximity tend to understand each other more easily, creating a pattern which can be sub-divided into four cluster areas...*

Maragolis are also found beyond the boundaries of Vihiga County. In 1927 they ventured into Uriri in Migori County. The international language encyclopedia *Ethnologue*, Issue no.16, even lists the Maragoli as a tribe in Tanzania, across the border from Migori. A contingent of Maragoli immigrants settled in Bunyoro, Uganda in 1958 following an agreement between the British colonial government and the Kingdom of Bunyoro. Now estimated at around 35,000, the Maragoli were even allocated land at Kigumba in Kiryandogo district but are now spread to Ntoma and Masindi. They have an unofficial pressure group led by one Eliakimu Adola pushing for their official recognition as a fully-fledged Ugandan tribe, having settled there for over half a century.

Masinde Muliro, a Bukusu, proved quite a principled and fair leader who earned respect across the community. Born at Matili near Kimilili in 1920, he was among the founders of the FORD party, which struggled against President Daniel arap Moi's one-party tyranny. Muliro instantly became the quintessential Luyia leader and is immortalised by a university in Kakamega, the Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST). On August 27, 2011, the government declared him a national hero.

Muliro came from the Bakokho clan, and his political defining moment came in

1975, when he voted against a government report into the murder of JM Kariuki. He was the only cabinet minister to do so. Peter Kibisu, an Assistant Minister for Labour and MP for Vihiga, also voted against the report. An angry President Jomo Kenyatta sacked both Muliro and Kibisu, tossing them into the political wilderness. Once again the Bukusu and Maragoli had proved their political mettle within the Luyia nation.

After Muliro's sacking, Moses Substone Budamba Mudavadi stepped into his large shoes. By virtue of his close association with President Moi, Mudavadi - a Maragoli - wielded immense power that was felt across Luyialand and beyond. Wycliffe Musalia Mudavadi has followed as a titular Luyia leader, but his "gentle" mien attracted detractors who until today feel he lacks "fire in his belly". Musalia, though, proved them all wrong in 2007, when under the ODM party he delivered 18 seats as the party's torch bearer. So far he has cut his own apron strings by launching the Amani National Congress (ANC).

Another leader who earned respect across the Luyia community was the late Michael Christopher Kijana Wamalwa. Though raised a Bukusu, his roots can be traced to the Sabaot. Wamalwa's father, Senator William Chemayek Ngeywo, was a Sabaot who changed his name to Wamalwa to get a missionary education as the Sabaot suffered discrimination in those days. ("Chemayek" in the Sabaot and indeed Kalenjin language is "alcohol" and its equivalent in naming is "Wamalwa" in Lu-bukusu.) Michael's mother, Esther Nekesa, however, was a Bukusu from the Baengele clan. His Sabaot roots did not matter as he was raised Bukusu, underscoring that the Luyia nation is a confluence of Kalenjin, Maasai, Luo and Bantu ethnicities

Although political unity has been a slippery path for Luyias, their most astounding success has occurred outside politics. The Abaluyia United Football Club (AFC Leopards) was formed in 1964. All teams under the sub-tribal banners agreed to merge and form one team. You can be sure everything was smooth until the Maragolis opted to remain autonomous by keeping their Maragoli United Football Club. Still, the club remains the only veritable symbol of Luyia unity where leading personalities have always sought to be elected chairman or patron. Player unity on the pitch helped it to succeed in the East African region.

The Luyia have adequate social tools to unify them into one coherent force: inter-marriages, esikuti dance, Ingwe (leopard) as a tribal totem and other symbols.

However, that all Luyias actually found themselves conjoined by colonialists makes it very difficult to lump them socio-culturally, politically and economically. They actually came from different directions and met within the boundaries of the so-called Western Province. Since they do not trace their lineage to one ancestor, like the Gikuyu with Mumbi or the Luos with Ramogi as their patriarch, it was arguably a convergence for convenience.

The Bukusu and Maragolis are undoubtedly great achievers among the Luyia sub-nations. Compared to other Luyia sub-nations, they know how to position themselves politically. Whereas Bukususes consider themselves warriors, Maragolis carry themselves as the elites of Luyialand who were the first to “see the light” when others were still in darkness. The two communities are also perceived to be haughty and domineering, a trait that repels both Maragolis and Bukususes from other Luyias. They have nowadays morphed into two great, conjoined siblings and none is ready to let go.

*The Luyia have adequate social tools to unify them into one coherent force: inter-marriages, esikuti dance, Ingwe (leopard) as a tribal totem and other symbols. However, that all Luyias actually found themselves conjoined by colonialists makes it very difficult to lump them socio-culturally, politically and economically.*

Indeed none is ready to be seen as subordinate to the other. They both have produced Vice Presidents in Kijana Wamalwa and Musalia Mudavadi, and in community leaders Masinde Muliro and Moses Mudavadi, and it appears as if they are always on a permanent ‘check-mate alert mode’. The recognition of Muliro in the naming of the biggest university in Luyialand located in Kakamega the headquarters of Luyias was perceived to be a scoop of sorts for the Bukususes. In addition, the biggest public park that convenes political rallies - Muliro Gardens - ‘*the biggest Oluyia*’ was also named after the great son of Bukusuland.

After all these years of push and pull based on historical and post-independent seeds of discord, it is clear that the elusive Luyia unity is still a long shot.

My friend James Wasike says, “as long as the Maragoli are always on standby to throw a spanner in the Bukusu works and vice-versa, Luyia unity will still remain a mirage”. Alternatively, as long as the Bukusu still harbour the Kaimosi grudge, where they were looked down upon by the Maragoli who are in any case their

historical competitors, the Luyia nation will not be able to truly say: 'I am my brother's keeper'.