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The Salient Socio-Agentive Position of Women in the Traditional African Society: A Case of Abaluhya Women of Western Kenya

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Abstract:
This article sought to examine the position of women in the traditional African society in Kenya before colonialism (before 1895). It narrowed down to the social organisation in the Luhya traditional society and the space women occupied in the same. It further delved into exploring the possibilities of empowerment or disempowerment for women in the social sphere among the Abaluhya. It addressed the aspect of women's agency in the Luhya social organisation, answering the question of what role women played in elevating their position socially. This article was supported by Lesley Ogundipe's African Feminist theory which holds that women had an essential role in the pre-colonial African society and that the structure of the society had room for women empowerment as opposed to the common belief that the African society disempowered women. Data for this study was collected using primary and secondary sources. Primary sources involved oral interviews, while secondary sources focused on analysing existing literature on the topic under study. The study analyzed five major aspects of the Luhya society and the role women played in them, namely: the clan and the family, initiation and marriage, informal education and apprenticeship, traditional religion and sex roles, and division of labour. The study found that women were centrally placed in the social structure of the Luhya society and that while some social aspects empowered them, others disempowered them. The study then concluded by assessing the role of women in elevating their own social status.

Keywords: African traditional society, Luhya social organisation, women empowerment/disempowerment, women agency

1. Introduction

Societies are created by an intricate merger between the social, economic, and political spheres. Sometimes, this merger makes it difficult to differentiate economic power from political influence or socio-religious from political power (Nyakwaka, 2013, p. 30). The political, socio-cultural, and economic position of women worldwide and narrowing down to Africa has been a topic of discussion for decades. It is agreeable amongst most scholars that women's roles in pre-colonial Africa varied from one community to another, depending on the beliefs and norms of different ethnic groups. In some societies, women exercised extensive authority, while in others, their role was subordinate to that of men. Wholesomely, the position, power, place, and authority of women in traditional African communities were neither special nor time-bound. Their power, authority, and position were highly dynamic and fluid as defined by the situation and domain of operation. Although cultural-bound, their power, authority, and position transcended conceptual borders and boundaries into unique areas exemplified by their role in various aspects of the social, economic and political spheres. This paper delved into the position of women in one aspect of the African traditional society – the social aspect among the Abaluhya of Western Kenya.

2. The Abaluhya of Western Kenya – An Overview

The Abaluhya of western Kenya are Bantu speakers categorised under the Western Bantu group. According to Osogo (1996:1), the word 'abaluhya' means 'fellow tribesmen'. Many Luhya clans have it in their traditions that they came from Egypt (*Misri*) between 1000 and 1700 AD. A few stated that they came from West Africa. However, the fact that they passed through Lake Albert in the region of Bunyoro in Uganda cuts across all their stories (Osogo 1996:39). While some Luhya clans remained in Uganda, such as those of the Abagisu (believed to have split from the Ababukusu of Kenya), many of them entered Kenya through Mt. Elgon and settled in various places in Western Kenya. The known Luhya sub-nations are: Ababukusu, Abawanga, Abakhayo, Abamarachi, Abasamia, Abatsotso, Abakisa, Abanyole, Abatiriki, Abalogoli, Abatakho (Idaho), Abisukha (Isukha), Abatachoni, Abanyala, Abakabras, and Abamarama. Those who place them at 18 add the Abasonga of Uganda (Osogo 1996:1).

The Abaluhya occupy the western part of Kenya, formerly known as Western province, one of the former seven administrative provinces outside Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. Western Province had its administrative headquarters at Kakamega. Following the introduction of devolution (introduction of county governments) under The Constitution of Kenya 2010, Western Kenya is now divided into five counties, namely:

- Busia,
- Kakamega,
- Bungoma,
- Vihiga, and
- Trans-Nzoia

The region occupies an area of approximately 7,400km². According to the 2019 census, the region is inhabited by 5,021,843 people. The Luhya region borders the state of Uganda to the west, the Nyanza region to the south, and Rift Valley region to the East. The furthest point of the region, which is Busia town, lies 458km from the capital of Kenya, Nairobi. The most notable physical features in the region are the Kakamega Forest in Kakamega, Mt. Elgon on the border of Bungoma and Trans-Nzoia, and Lake Victoria in Busia.

3. Organisation of the Traditional Luhya Society

Just like any other society, the Luhya traditional society was organised into three major spheres; social, economic, and political. However, as noted earlier, the three spheres had an intricate interdependence making it difficult to draw the line between where the jurisdiction of one sphere began and where that of another ended. The social sphere entailed matters concerning the conditions of society relating to people's behavior, including how they interacted with one another and their family structures. It dealt with the well-being of an individual in society. Social aspects of society included but were not limited to education, health, family/clan ties, religion, beliefs, norms and taboos, entertainment, rites of passage, ceremonies and sex roles or division of labour, etcetera. The economic sphere referred to matters relating to means of earning a livelihood or access to means of production such as land. It dealt with the distribution of resources so that the material wants of a society were met. Economic activities varied depending on the available natural resources or opportunities, and examples included: trade, mining, crop cultivation, blacksmithing, clothmaking, pottery and basketry (crafts), pastoralism, hunting, gathering, and fishing. The political sphere, on the other hand, entailed matters relating to leadership, authority, and power relations. In the traditional society, the political sphere included but was not limited to rules/laws, bureaucracy, jurisdiction, heredity, foreign policy, alliances, conquest, and systems of justice.

The position of women in the above-mentioned spheres among the Abaluhya was specially reserved. However, women were more active in the social and economic spheres than in the political sphere. This owes to the fact that the place of women in most African societies was assumed to be in the domestic sphere and not the public sphere. However, this did not denote exclusion of the women or disempowerment of women in the latter sphere. This article centred on the social organisation of the Abaluhya and the position of women in the same.

3.1. The Basic Social Organisation of the Luhya Society and the Place of Women in Various Social Aspects

This section addresses five major social categories of the Luhya society and the place of women in them, which are:

- The clan and family,
- Initiation and marriage,
- Informal education and apprenticeship,
- Traditional religion and
- Sex roles/division of labour

3.1.1. The Clan and the Family

The Luhya 'nation' was divided into clans (the largest social unit) which were clusters of kin who claimed a common ancestry (Gumo 2018:1248). However, it is essential to note that this kin could rarely, if ever, trace the actual links of descent. The clans among the Abaluhya subethnicities were exogamous units that differentiated themselves from each other by various ritual prohibitions such as taboos of certain foods or uniqueness in language that gave them a sense of unity and distinctiveness from others (Gumo 2018:1248). Each clan had a totem and, with a few exceptions, was named after its founder. No clan among the Luhya that was founded by women as the Luhya society was highly patrilineal. This already preludes the position of women in the Luhya community. Each clan had a male leader responsible for determining clan affairs.

Within a clan, there were families. The concept of family in the African continent is broad with challenging variations caused by certain differences in ethnic customs or culture according to geography, history, religion, external influence of colonialism, intermigration, political and economic structures, and influences (Mwizenge 2018:3).

In line with this, Luhya families within a clan may have been related to other clans due to relationships either out of marriage alliances or migrations. Families lived in homesteads surrounded by a euphorbia hedge. According to Gumo, the homestead was the basic unit of a lineage (p.1248). The occupants of a homestead were husbands, wives, and children. The father was the head of the family and commanded respect with roles such as presiding over family functions and making decisions concerning the family (Gumo, 2018:1248). Women had a say in the decisions of the homestead and family. They ensured that the decisions of their husbands were implemented. Luhya families were made up of:

- The nuclear unit held in association by a common father,

- Extended members where the brothers of the father were all referred to as 'father',
- All the sisters of the mother referred to as 'mother', and
- All their children referred to as 'brother and or sister' (Gumo, 2018:1248)

3.1.2. Initiation and Marriage

An initiated male would be ready to start a family with an initiated female. The process of initiation among the Luhya concerned undergoing a set of rites to start a new phase or beginning in life as it marked the passing from one phase in life to the next more mature phase (Gumo, 2018:1249). Initiation in a man or woman's life has a lot to do with transformation. Among the Luhya, there were varied ways of initiation for both men and women. It is assumed that all of the Luhya subethnicities initiated their males through circumcision, a concept that is not entirely true. The Bukusu, for example, were very strict on the circumcision of males. However, the Abakhayo, Abamarachi, Abanyala, and Abasamia of Busia District adopted this later, with the coming of Christianity (Muleka, OI., Mundika, 03/07/21). Those who did not adopt circumcision carried out other initiation activities, such as knocking out six lower teeth among the Abakhayo and Abamarachi (Gumo: 1249). This was perhaps copied from their Luo neighbours. Women's initiation methods also varied among subethnicities. While the Bukusu women were initiated through beautiful markings on their faces and/or chest and back, Kisa, Khayo, and Marachi women would also knock out one or several teeth in addition to markings on the face, chest, or back. In some subethnicities, such as among the Maragoli and Banyore, initiation of girls was not commonplace. For the subethnicities that practiced initiation for women, the practice was empowering for the women as it showed readiness for the next stage in life, which was marriage. As in the case of men, a woman who had borne the pain of initiation was surely woman enough to start a family, and those who had not been initiated were considered weak and unqualified.

Marriage was another feature of the Luhya society that shaped the position of a woman. It was basically a rite of passage. Exogamy was practiced, as members of one clan were not allowed to marry each other. All adult women and men in the African society were supposed to marry as a means of procreation and ensure the continuity of the clan (Nyakwaka, 2013:31). A man who did not marry was known as *musumba* (meaning a bachelor) and was despised and segregated by the community as it was considered a peculiarity. If anything, he was not allowed to participate in cultural activities as it was believed he would bring a bad omen to the community (Nyakwaka, 2013:31). All women of marriageable age had to get married. To ensure that no woman missed a man to marry, polygamy was encouraged as it is almost certain that throughout history, women have always been more in number. It would be prestigious for a man to have many wives as it was a symbol of wealth and power (Gumo, 2018:1249). Kunguru (OI, Mundika, 09/10/21) notes that the first wife was consulted when her husband wanted to marry another wife.

There were different types of marriages.

First, there were child engagements, which were done when a girl and a boy were young. This was basically meant to seal friendships between families so that when the children became adults, they were married off (Nyakwaka, 2013:32).

Another type was an elopement. While some girls willingly eloped, others were forcefully abducted by their would-be husbands and their friends. The girl would then send a message to her family that she was now married (Nyakwaka, 2013:32).

Thirdly, a young man, ready for marriage, would ask a go-between to scout for a wife from a good home. This would possibly be an aunt that was married far away or the mother's brother. If the mission were successful, a meeting would be arranged for the families of the two young people, culminating in a marriage (Nyakwaka, 2013:32). The fourth mode was wife inheritance. Once a married man died, the woman would automatically be inherited by a brother or a cousin. Lastly, there were marriages for political reasons such as strengthening political ties or as a sign of political cooperation. Women would be 'given' to other communities as a way to safeguard their own community against political aggression. A good example comes from marriages between the Abakhayo of Busia and the Ateso, a Nilotic group that borders the Abaluhya in Busia. Once a Luhya girl was married off to a Teso man and vice versa, the two would not attack each other due to the knowledge that their own was in the other community (Kunguru, OI, Mundika, 03/07/21).

For marriage to take place, the respective families would launch fact-finding missions on both the man and the woman. Once satisfied, parents or sometimes the clan/community of prospective partners would approve for the marriage to go forward. The father or family of the man would then provide bridewealth for him so that the marriage contract between the two families could be completed after a series of ceremonies (Gumo, 2018:1249).

Marriage would have various implications on women depending on the type/purpose of the marriage. First, the feeling of being married was fulfilling and thus empowering to a Luhya woman. Particularly, the feeling of belonging/acceptance would boost a woman's confidence once married, as she would have met societal expectations. This feeling would be even better if the woman found a soft landing in the marriage where the husband respected and treated her well. Secondly, if the marriage were meant to unite two ruling families for political benefit, this would empower the woman as it would place her right at the top of a political union. Her presence in the other family would then trigger an alliance in social, political, and economic spheres, thus bringing peace between clans or communities. If a marriage turned out to cause misery to the woman, for example, due to mistreatment by the husband or the husband's family, the woman would end up enduring the marriage instead of enjoying it. If she sent word back to her people about her misery, they would intervene as her ties with her family would still be maintained. In dire cases, families would withdraw their children from abusive marriages.

Misfortunes such as barrenness would both empower or disempower a woman in a marriage. It would be considered one of the greatest misfortunes in a marriage. This would lower the status and the respect accorded to a

married woman, thus disempowerment. To solve the problem, a woman would be allowed to 'marry'. In this case, marrying meant that she would bring another woman to bear children for her by her (the latter's) husband. This would revive the lost glory of the woman. In cases of wife inheritance, the woman would have to endure the choice of the family of who would inherit her. Depending on her liking/dislike of her new partner, the marriage would either empower or disempower.

Polygamy as an aspect of the Luhya society would also go either way for women. This would solely depend on the reason/reasons for the practice. The first wife was given a high rank in the home if the man was marrying solely for prestige. Besides being consulted before others are married in the home, she would also be empowered by being given the 'managerial' position of overseeing the other wives. As noted earlier, sometimes, women would be the ones to propose that their husband brings another wife. This would come about if and when the woman felt overwhelmed with duties in the home, such as farm work. She would therefore ask the husband to bring a 'helper'. This allowed women to even choose a partner for their husbands, which was empowering. However, if polygamy was motivated by the shortcomings of a wife, the 'bad' wife could end up being demeaned by mockery from the subsequent wives. In the worst-case scenario, an irredeemably 'bad' wife would be sent back to her parents. However, the position of a woman in a Luhya marriage/family of being the caretaker of the home was undisputed.

Sex was strictly prohibited before marriage. This was to encourage siring of only legitimate children in a marriage (Nyakwaka, 2013:32). A woman and a man who would bear a child before marriage would often be ridiculed and forced to marry the person with whom they sired the child. However, if the marriage did not happen, it would be very difficult for a woman to get a man to marry her later. The man, on the other hand, could easily get a partner and move on. If the woman failed to get married, as among the Bukusu, she would be considered a waste in the home and would often be buried along the fence with her head facing the opposite direction, mostly away from the sunset (Sindani, OI, Bunyala, 20/11/21).

Women were restricted from openly expressing sexual desire. If anything, she was in a marriage to please and satisfy the man and not herself. She was only supposed to procreate (Sindani, OI, Bunyala, 20/11/21. Married women were often discouraged from extramarital affairs. Mostly, the mother-in-law was supposed to shave a newborn child for the first time. If the child was not his son's, it is believed that the child would die (*ishira*). Similarly, if a woman had extramarital affairs after the birth of a child, the child would suffer the same fate (Sindani, OI, Bunyala, 20/11/21). Comparatively, a man could easily marry as many wives as he wanted. This clearly shows an inequality between men and women in Luhya society.

The Children were the pride of every couple, and every couple was encouraged to get as many children as possible mainly to counter the high infant mortality rate (Nyakwaka, 2013:32). Many children would also be an advantage in terms of labour on the farms. Both boys and girls were valued in the Luhya society. Ogola (in Nyakwaka, 2013:32) notes that 'a home without daughters is like a spring without a source', and in the same breath, a boy child meant 'continuation of life'. However, a man who failed to sire boys would be ridiculed as the patrilineal Luhya society believed that continuity was only through the son. It is, therefore, no secret that boy-children attracted pride and prestige towards the father (Oseno, OI, 10/09/21). The girls would mainly attract material wealth in bride price to the family. These early perceptions would shape the positioning of boys and girls in society as boys would see themselves as superior to their female counterparts. Children, in this sense, ensured the continuity of the generations.

3.1.3. Informal Education and Apprenticeship

Children in the family acquired values and learnt skills and techniques as part of their cultural heritage (Gumo, 2018). Through time, informal education became the main way through which values were passed down from one generation to another. The whole gamut of education was located in and defined by sets of values that reflect the community's aims and objectives in a lifelong process of education (Avoseh, 2008:1).

The elder members of the family, starting with the parents, played a crucial role in the informal instruction. They would teach how to acquire basic virtues such as honesty, tolerance, truthfulness, humility, integrity, honour, self-control, patience, industry, empathy, cooperation, harmony, generosity, mutual helpfulness, human life, respect for older people, among others, and shun undesirable behaviours such as laziness, disobedience, cruelty, selfishness, bullying, aggressiveness, theft, adultery, and deceitfulness (Opoku, 1985:6).

The values were aimed at developing the body and the soul. Because of the holistic nature of the traditional society, it was impossible to separate education from life and vice versa. Thus, these lifelong values were, like education, inseparable from life (Avoseh, 2008). After foundational education during childhood, one would then 'graduate' into higher levels of education. At this stage, the initiation period would become the most crucial as it prepared one to assume his/her status and obligations of manhood and womanhood in society (Osogo 1966:10).

After initiation, the youth would be taught their different responsibilities to society. Boys would be taught how to head a family, while women would be taught to be good wives and mothers. Here, the separation of boys and girls would occur as their different responsibilities would be clearly defined. Reproduction and family roles would be taught. Later in adulthood, education would still continue with different values being inculcated into the adult men and women, including 'higher education' in cults and societies. Even in death, these same values guided and determined individuals who aspire to become revered ancestors irrespective of gender or socio-economic status (Avoseh, 2008). Education empowered women to fit in their society. Through the same education, a woman was taught her position as subordinate to that of a man. She was taught to submit to her husband and other men at all times, a practice she would carry through her entire life. This partly explains why women hardly joined the male-dominated political sphere.

In an area such as education, women in Luhya society thrived both as teachers and learners. Women especially took the education of girls seriously, as much more was expected from African women. Grandmothers, mothers, and aunties were the lifelong teachers of girls in society. The extent of the education Luhya women received in pre-colonial Kenya was how to do the jobs women had been doing for years, such as being a wife, a caregiver, childbirth, and housekeeping. Playing this role gave many Luhya women a sense of identity, which most women cherished (Sindani, OI, Bunyala, 20/11/21.

According to Nyakwaka (2013:32), women as teachers in the African society 'gave girls elements of an intimate understanding of a complex and physically emotive social world'. Roles that were taught by the old women were:

- How to relate with future spouses and in-laws,
- How to remain virginity until marriage, and
- How to take care of children and the home, among others

Perhaps this involvement of women in educating girls allowed the Luhya society to thrive as these young 'students' would then grow into responsible and mature women who would bear children and nurture generations. As adults, women would be trained by fellow women to fit into different specializations such as medicine and midwifery. As a result of this informal education, women became holistic individuals contributing fully to society as they played their expected roles. The education thus empowered the women to know themselves and be true to their main responsibility, ensuring the continuity of society. This meant that the pivotal role of women in nurturing and educating children was highly valued by the whole community.

Apprenticeship was another aspect of Luhya's traditional education. Apprenticeship was through observation, participation, and execution of acquired skills. Apprenticeship was done by both men and women depending on the gender of the apprentice. Oral literature (stories, riddles, proverbs, poems, songs, legends, and lullabies), music, games, dances, and taboos would be other minor means of apprenticeship as they reflected every aspect of the African culture (Gumo, 2018:1249). Through stories, children would be entertained and instructed and acquire knowledge about the history of the tribe. This would be done around an evening fire. Riddles were generally designed to develop a child's memory and promote language, while the elders would use myths to explain phenomena that young people could not understand. On the other hand, legends explained actual events such as heroes and heroines of the society, which instilled bravery into the young ones. Folktales were primarily to teach about day-to-day life. Skills such as leadership, carving, masonry, boat/canoe building, hunting, herding, blacksmithing/weaponry, mining, rainmaking, and war skills were mostly handed down to the boys, while skills in cooking, home management, childcare, and midwifery were taught to the girls. Pottery, weaving, crop-cultivation, medicine, clay work, and clothmaking would be unisex skills (Gumo, 2018:1249). Although the skills given to either men or women complimented and completed each other, women were given 'softer' skills than men. This is because men were assumed to be biologically and physically stronger than women. If interested in their children learning particular skills, parents would send their children to live/work with members who were already experts in their specific fields, such as pottery, basketry, blacksmithing, medicine, or midwifery.

Ceremonies were also another avenue for teaching. Through rites, feasts, festivals, and music such as folk songs and dances, children learnt values passed on from one generation to another within kinship groups (Gumo, 2018:1250). At such rituals and ceremonies, special lessons would be given to the youth about marriage, culture, and history. Here, they were expected to internalise communal attitudes rather than individual ones. This would be done through theoretical and inculcation skills (Gumo, 2018:1250). Through such ceremonies, women would come out strongly to represent their gender-based issues through music and dance. They would sing against social injustices against women, such as wife battering, favouritism, laziness among men/women, bad mothers-in-law, or jealousy among co-wives, among other themes. They would also sing about their roles as mothers and wives and exalt heroines – women who could do great things. A good example was the Abakhayo women, who would sing songs about Obimo, the only woman who could save a mother whose fetus had died prematurely in the womb (Muleka, OI, Mundika, 03/07/21). She was even assumed to have special powers of 'talking' to the stillborn baby to 'come out' and not kill the mother. In marriage ceremonies, they could sing songs to encourage the young wife to be submissive and respectful towards the husband, among other duties of a wife in a home. To a given extent, such ceremonies highly motivated and empowered the women as they gave them freedom of expression. In ceremonies, women's prowess in cooking and brewing traditional brews was manifested, a factor that empowered them. However, the glory of the ceremony would mostly fall on the host of the ceremony – the man of the home. This meant that women received little recognition for the success of ceremonies.

3.1.4. Traditional Religion

Religion was another aspect that defined the position of women in the larger African society and among the Luhya. All African societies developed intricate sets of customs, rules, and taboos that guided ethics in their communities. Many of these societies believed that their morals originated from a higher power, mostly a supreme being – God and the ancestors (Gumo, 2018:1250). These morals were also believed to have been imparted to human's right at creation and thus were part and parcel of human life. This immanent dimension emphasised the oneness of God and man (Mbiti, 1969:29).' This is to mean that there was no place for atheists in the African concept of God. If anything, knowing God was instinctive knowledge gifted to a child at birth. Among the Ashanti of Ghana, there existed a proverb that said, 'No one shows a child the Supreme Being (Mbiti, 1969:29).'

Although there was no sacred text in written form about God, the root of his existence was taken from the proverbs, statements, songs, religious rituals, prayers, and myths, among other day-to-day activities.

Many scholars believe that religion may have been a tool for both exaltation and oppression/subjugation of women in the traditional African setting. In some African societies, women were healers with special powers to tackle a range of problems. In others, they were priestesses, prophetesses, and goddesses/wives to gods and would possess mystical powers. An example lies in the *zaar* cults that were found in Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Egypt (Mbiti, 1991:60). As goddesses, they were perceived to be very industrious with enormous financial capability, sometimes even more prosperous than their husbands. Goddesses and other religious women were closely linked to governance. Osun, a goddess among the Yoruba, is said to have defended the community during wars and ensured the protection of the empire's territory. Therefore, the throne was closely tied to Osun (Ammah, 1992:75). In settings where the post of the queen mother was relevant, such women were associated with divinity. Religious leaders could depend on their mothers for advice and secrecy. Men were seen as rulers but unable to stand without the invincible base of support from religious women (Ammah, 1992:75). The dependence of leaders on religious women raised the status of women in society. If anything, this dependence may have been one realm over which patriarchy had no control. Among the Luo of Uganda, women were the divine-mediators. This role saw women become the link between the living and the spirits. They could heal the sick, predict wars, pray for warriors before the war and avert evil (Tamale, 1999:6). In some cases, however, women who possessed them may have used such mystical powers for personal or selfish gains. In some communities, women could be used to preserve deities. Some 'good' spirits could be invoked and allowed to dwell among the community through young girls (Ammah, 1992:75).

Similarly, women were at the centre of religion among the Luhya, a deeply religious community. The Luhya believed in one God, *Were Khakaba* or *Nyasaye,* which means 'the creator of the beginning' (Gumo, 2018:1250). The word Nyasaye was also used by the Luo who border the Luhya, which perhaps suggests borrowing. They also believed in a series of spirits (*Emisambwa*) who rewarded good deeds and punished bad deeds (Gumo, 2018:1250). While the role of women in the Luhya religious setting was prominent, sometimes, patriarchy prevailed. Were notes that although supernatural powers could be held by either men or women among the Luhya, mostly, the religious leadership may have been associated with the males. She highlights that there are various roles held by women. They would be diviners, mediators, and prophetesses (Were, OI, Samia 07/07/21) and explain some events beyond human understanding, such as epidemics, natural calamities, or barrenness. Medicine women were closely tied to religion and could cure a wide variety of diseases using herbs they collected in the forests and riverbanks and performing midwifery duties. She adds that when a problem arose, sometimes, female diviners would be consulted, after which they could consult the supernatural powers and communicate the outcome.

However, she agreed with Delahunty (2012:7), according to whom religion was a tool of subjugation of women among the Luhya. Presumably, among the Luhya, the inclination towards the notion that God is male was strong. This made most males in the community take a patriarchal approach to many issues in life, including religious leadership. Were observes that some specific religious roles would never be left to the women, such as rituals pertaining to offering sacrifices to God or the ancestors. Sometimes, women could be denied to perform religious roles that they were initially allowed to because of their biology. For example, a woman would be required to refrain from shrines and other religious duties when they were experiencing menstruation. They were considered 'unclean' at this point. This is a striking similarity to the Old Testament of the Bible, where God refers to menstruating women as 'unclean' in the laws given to Moses (Leviticus 15:19-30). This could easily make one believe that a woman's biology is her weakness. In addition, women were seen as weak-willed and thus prone to possession by evil spirits.

Further, Were (OI, Samia, 07/07/21) notes that some Luhya women with supernatural capabilities were painted in a bad light. Sometimes, they were associated with evil deeds such as witchcraft and sorcery, which inflicted suffering on the community. Among the Samia of Busia County, some women with special powers would be said to have a 'bad eye' and would 'plant' harmful spirits or substances (e*bikhokho*) into people, especially babies, which would sometimes kill the child. Some would even murder or inflict barrenness among fellow women out of jealousy or selfish interests. The community would abhor such women, and in most cases, they would be secluded by the rest of the community.

3.1.5. Sex Roles and Division of Labour

Sex roles among the Abaluhya were clearly defined. According to Gumo (2018:1249), women in the pre-colonial Luhya society '...played critical roles as agents of propagation of its (the community's) genetic stock, preservation of culture, the cohesion of society, and economic growth through birthing and nurturing of babies, raising children, exerting collective moral coercive force for the common good and partaking of socio-economic endeavours.' In addition, he notes that women did most of the cultivation and all domestic work, such as fetching firewood and water, cooking and basket weaving, and keeping the home clean (Gumo, 2018:1249). Of course, young girls would tag along and learn from their mothers in preparation for marriage. For the Luhya men, Gumo says, they '...helped with clearing bushes, house building, and looking after cattle, sheep, and goats. Boys assisted in the herding of the cattle' (Gumo, 2018:1249). Iron smelting, weaponry, boat-making, and fishing were also a preserve of the men (Were, OI, Samia, 07/07/21). The role of the elderly (both men and women) was advisory as they were believed to possess a wealth of experience (Gumo, 2018:1249). In analysing the above division of roles, it needs no explanation for one to see the difference in the nature of chores that each gender was assigned. While the men performed harder chores that were mostly done away from home, women were left with the 'softer' chores found mostly within the home. Were (OI, Samia, 07/07/21) attributes this to the biology of the woman whom the Luhya man would term 'weaker' and thus could not handle the tough jobs. A woman who would venture into manly jobs would mostly be feared by the men. Although the roles for each gender were separate, communalism was emphasized and encouraged. As Gumo notes, communalism was a deliberately desired social structure that was

established and zealously sustained by a people's will and desire to survive under the most certain and tried conditions. In conclusion, the social organization of the Luhya traditional society laid a foundation for the positioning of women, which would, in turn, affect their position in all other spheres of life.

In summary, the control of women was central in many African societies. Social organisation, economic activities, warfare, state formation, and political centralisation elevated men over women.

Even in non-centralised states, the processes of production and reproduction in kinship networks subordinated women to men. However, the subordination of women in the African traditional society was not equal to disempowerment. Women were given their space and allowed to freely practice what they needed to within that space. For the women of Buluhya, that was empowerment.

4. Women Agency in the Traditional African Society among the Abaluhya

At this point, it is possible to ask what the women were doing for themselves or to improve their status in the traditional Luhya society. There were various ways through which women became their own agents of empowerment. Women were in charge of their fellow women's health. As medicine women or midwives, women went to various lengths to ensure that fellow women survived and thrived. Other than caring for fellow women's health, elderly medicine women would pass on the skill through apprenticeship. Once a woman learnt such skills, she would be empowered by earning a status in society as they helped fellow women. Skills passed on were of a wide range from crafts making to midwifery to cultivation and trade, among others. These skills not only earned women a status in society but also economic gains.

Tied to apprenticeship was informal education. As noted earlier, grandmothers, mothers, and aunties were entrusted with the duty of teaching younger girls various aspects of womanhood. Before initiation, girls were taught various responsibilities such as:

Collecting firewood,
- Cooking,
- Grooming,
- Farm care

They were also taught other domestic responsibilities in addition to values such as:
- Respect,
- Mutual social responsibility,
- Honesty,
- Love, and
- Appreciation, among others

After initiation, the girls would be taught the responsibilities that came with adulthood. Women would teach girls various secrets of the community, allowing them to cope or understand various aspects of the community. They would also initiate girls into marriage by teaching them the responsibilities of a married woman, such as childbirth and care, family planning, family care, planning and budgeting, relations with in-laws or co-wives, conflict resolution in the home, etcetera. These activities earned women the role of teachers. They were not only teaching but also empowering fellow women to cope and survive through daily challenges. In case of challenging situations, women would be advisors to fellow women, thus reducing stress and failure.

Women were also vocal in advocacy against injustices done to fellow women. Women formed bands that would condemn actions such as wife battering, neglect, or mistreatment by husbands. Lazy or drunk men who left all domestic responsibilities to women were also dealt with. The women would compose songs, dances, and poems that would condemn and ridicule such actions. Such songs would be performed in ceremonies where everybody would be in attendance. Such public humiliation of men would force them to refrain from such acts. In this way, women's rights were upheld. These roles that women played in society go hand in hand with Ogundipe's thoughts in the African Feminism Theory, which supports the fact that women were empowered in the traditional society by virtue of women being let to empower fellow women, as discussed above.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the position of a woman among the Abaluhya was well defined in the traditional socio-economic and political structures. Therefore, women knew their boundaries in their involvement in various matters. They were involved in all spheres of life but with varying degrees. Women were more involved in economic and social matters than political ones. They would be in the frontline to ensure continuity of the community through reproduction and then take charge of food production to ensure maturity of the young ones into adults. In addition, women were always associated with the home, and thus they ran the home. This, for the women, was empowerment as it gave them a degree of power in the mentioned spheres. However, this was not without salient concerns.

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