

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTRIBUTION OF THE SAGES IN PRE-COLONIAL LUO SOCIETY OF HOMA-BAY COUNTY; KENYA UP TO 1895

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the contribution of sages in pre-modern Luo society up to 1895. It adopted both historical research design and descriptive research design. Additionally, the study used non-probability sampling techniques and employed purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. The study found out that sages were present in premodern society and they greatly contributed to the social, economic and political organization of the Luo people. They used several methods to pass their sagas but the coming of the colonial government affected the operations of these sages.

Keywords: Sages, Precolonial, Luo society, Homabay, up to 1895.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the pre-modern Luo society of what is today Homa Bay County, revered individuals known for their exceptional wisdom, moral authority and experience who held a significant and respected position, whose presence and identity were not merely incidental but central to the spiritual, social and political life of the community. Homabay was a home to sages who were respected and recognized in the whole of the Luo society. Their dressing code, residential areas and the things they owned set them apart from all other individuals in society. The sages were instrumental in shaping the complex socio-economic and political Luo society but the coming of the colonial government greatly affected their roles.

Presence of Sages in Pre-Modern Homabay County

In the pre-modern Luo society of Homa Bay County, sages played a pivotal role in shaping the social, spiritual, economic and political fabric of the community (Odera, 1990). The presence of the sages according to Saoke, KII (16/05/2025) was widespread, and they were highly revered as sources of wisdom, healing, spiritual insight and leadership. These sages were often individuals with extraordinary gifts and rare knowledge who offered guidance, performed rituals, mediated conflicts and preserved oral traditions as their influence was rooted not in political authority, but in their respected reputation, supernatural insight and cultural knowledge (Ogot, 1967).

Nyandiko, (KII; 18/05/2025) asserts that among the most well-remembered sages was Nyakiti Kogutu who was known for his power to summon rain during long droughts and his ability to find cure to several diseases. He was often consulted in times of extreme weather and his knowledge and wisdom was believed to bring balance between the people and nature. Ouko (O.I; 1/06/2025) narrates that Silermina of Wasare had great knowledge in agricultural production and trade. Her skills in weed control through crop rotations and driving away pests such as birds and locust invasions that threatened her farm were highly valued and often sought by most people of her time.

Inspite, Silermima's deep knowledge of herbs and ritual chants made her a protector of agriculture and food security. In Karachuonyo, Ajwang Wuon Yadh Winy also shares similar roles associated with plant medicine and ancestral worship as well as driving away pests such as birds, worms and locusts away from Karachuonyo. He cultivated sacred trees believed to house spirits and used them in rituals for blessing, cleansing and healing (Nyandiko, KII;18/05/2025).

Another notable sage among the Luo was Gor Mahia, who is possibly the most legendary of the sages among the Luo, was reputed to possess supernatural powers, including invisibility and spiritual vision. Gor could call spirits, foresee dangers and interpret dreams, making him a mystical figure of immense influence and his guidance was sought during times of war and epidemics cementing his legacy among the Kanyamua and the entire Luo society (Adrian, 2005 and Nyandiko, KII; 18/05/2025).

In Karachuonyo, there existed one of the literate sages in the name of Paul Mboya, who offered guidance on economic organization and political leadership and his wisdom helped bridge traditional systems with emerging modern governance structures (Mboya, 1938). He served as a cultural diplomat, interpreting Luo values to colonial and post-colonial governments (Godfrey, 2022). In Karachuonyo, Onyango Riga was also widely known for his healing abilities, especially of mysterious illnesses believed to be caused by curses or spiritual imbalance and his compound in Kanyipir was often full of people seeking physical and spiritual restoration (Saoke, KII; 16/05/2025). In Kabuoch, Olieko, (KII; 20/05/2025) identifies Owuor Jasakwa who was a ritual expert, skilled in conducting rites of passage, cleansing ceremonies and ancestral blessings and his work was critical during funerals, birth ceremonies and the installation of elders.

In traditional music industry, Weke Jakolenya, an *orutu* musician, is considered a sage from Kabuoch as he used songs such as *mer mer te* and *imiya to imayi* as a tool of political awareness and cultural education. His songs warned of moral decay and called for unity, making him both an entertainer and a moral compass, just like George Ramogi, a musician, is also identified as a sage because of his song titled Alice Beldina Anyango which he used to promote girlchild education at the time when the society and fellow musicians disregarded the girlchild's ability to be in school (Odundo, KII; 16/05/2025; Pamela, O.I; 28/05/2025). Omollo Wuon Nyandule is considered a sage because he was a seer and dream interpreter who could accurately predict events such as droughts, diseases or communal conflict. His predictions were taken seriously and used to prepare the community spiritually and practically (Owade, KII; 20/05/2025). Joshua Koyo, a renowned peacemaker and a community mediator, played vital roles in resolving disputes between clans and families. His speech was full of wisdom, proverbs and traditional jurisprudence (Aparasia, KII;14/06/2025).

Identity of sages in Homabay County

The elevation of individuals to the status of sages involved participation in communal rituals and demonstration of lifelong wisdom. Sages in Homabay county were identified by various factors such as their homestead, dressing codes, interaction with common people and rituals during their death and burial as explained below.

Homesteads

The physical location of a sage's homestead often reflected his social role. According to Pamela, (O.I; 28/05/2025) *duol* (council hut) was typically located near the sage's homestead, reinforcing his central role in public deliberation. She adds that the residence of a sage was structurally and

symbolically unique within the clan settlement. Their homesteads were usually centrally located within the clan's spatial arrangement, often built on elevated terrain. According to Mungeam (1978), this central position reflected their status as the spiritual and intellectual nucleus of the community. The homestead (*dala*) was expansive, comprising a main house, smaller huts for wives and guests, storage granaries and sometimes ritual shrines as certain areas within the homestead which were designated for spiritual activities (KNA/DC/EN/3/2/2;1955). Muga (KII; 20/05/2025) agrees with Mungeam (1978) that artifacts such as ancestral posts, sacred stones and carved wooden figurines marked the presence of spiritual practices of the sages. She further elaborates that such sites were used for prayers and pouring libations and that the presence of ceremonial stools (*orindi*), calabashes (*koo*) for traditional beer or herbs and drums for summoning gatherings further distinguished a sage's home.

In the opinion of Liech (O.I; 1/6/2025) sages were known to own certain items that reflected their function in society, calabashes (*koo*) used for storing traditional brews, sacred water or medicinal herbs, drums (*bul*) and horns (*oporo*) used to summon people for meetings or ceremonies, medicinal shrines especially for sages who were also *ajuoga*, shrines for healing and ritual purification were common and stools and ritual seats only used by sages during community discussions, these were carved to reflect their lineage or spiritual patronage (KNA/DC/EN/3/2/2;1955). She adds that some sages also kept some wild animals such as snakes, mostly pythons, hyenas, leopards or tortoises as well as dead owls, lion skin and ivory. These items were not only symbols of status but were integral to the performance of the sage's duties in spiritual, advisory and judicial roles.

In Karachuonyo, the homestead of Nyakiti was not just a domestic space but a center of judicial arbitration and communal planning (Nyandiko, KII;18/05/2025). Odhiambo (1977) and Ouko (O.I;1/06/2025) both agree that these spatial markers, sacred groves, council huts and ritual sites, reinforced the sage's visibility and access to the public. As stated by Onjuma (KII;31/05/2025), the rite of *gweh* (blessing) signified recognition of one's social maturity. Sages were often called to preside over *chodo okola* (ancestral libation) ceremonies, rainmaking rituals and land-cleansing rites. Wagumba (KII; 13/05/2025) adds that these ritual roles granted the sages spiritual authority and associated them with ancestral wisdom and spirit, further entrenching their identity in community. Sage-hood was commonly constructed through community acknowledgment rather than heredity, hence those who sat in the *duol*, listening to the speech patterns, judgments and historical accounts shared by sages gained wisdom and later became sages (Wiredu, 1980). According to Odundo, (KII;16/05/2025), in Kaksingiri, a man named Obongo Okoth was known for gathering youths to train them in the art of *wacho riek* (speaking wisely) in an oral tradition which functioned as a classroom for moral and intellectual apprenticeship. Hence the image of sages was richly represented in oral literature in the form of Folktales, proverbs and praise poetry which emphasized the value of age and wisdom. Additionally, their homes often contained sacred fire pits or ancestral groves where they communicated with spirits (Cajete, 2000). The spiritual dimension of the sage's identity meant that their authority was not merely social but cosmic connected to both past ancestors and future generations (Saoke, KII; 16/05/2025).

Dressing Code

According to Abimbola (1976), sages commonly adorned themselves in garments made from animal skin, particularly cowhide or leopard skin, which symbolized strength, courage and seniority. Nyandiko (KII; 18/05/2025) affirms that the skins were often softened and processed to

suit the warm climate of the Lake Victoria region. He adds that such skins were typically obtained from sacrificial or communal animals, which added spiritual significance to the attire. This was echoed by Liech (O.I; 1/6/2025) who noted that wearing these skins marked the wearer as a person deeply connected to ancestral wisdom and divine communication. In addition to animal skin, sages wore beadwork and traditional ornaments that carried symbolic meaning. Beads were usually worn around the neck, waist, arms and legs (Nasr, 2006). Each color and design carried a message, for instance, white beads signified purity and truth, which were essential qualities of a sage (Nasr, 2006 and KNA/MFN/SL/025/1714/MUS). According to Saoke (KII; 16/05/2025), certain bead patterns were restricted to elders and sages, indicating their role as spiritual guides and advisors. Furthermore, headgear was a distinctive feature of sages' dressing, they often wore elaborate headdresses made from feathers of sacred birds like owls or eagles, which symbolized foresight and wisdom, traits associated with the sage's ability to foresee events and offer guidance (Cajete, 2000). In the confirmation of Olieko, (KII; 20/05/2025) headgear was not worn casually, it was done during rituals, public forums, or while dispensing knowledge. Pamela (O.I; 28/05/2025) added that some sages even adorned their heads with clay, mixed with herbs, which had medicinal or spiritual properties. While Ogallo, (KII; 19/05/2025) elaborates that footwear, although minimal in many instances, also had symbolic importance. Sages sometimes wore sandals made from animal hides or went barefoot during sacred ceremonies to maintain spiritual contact with the earth, which was believed to hold ancestral power. These rituals often took place at night or in sacred groves, making their dressing code both practical and symbolic.

The use of walking sticks or staff, often carved with intricate symbols or animal motifs, was another key feature of a sage's dress (Suzuki, 1956). Both Odundo (KII;16/05/2025) and Suzuki (1956), agree that these staff were not just mobility aids but symbols of authority and knowledge. Odundo (KII;16/05/2025) further notes that such staff were often handed down through generations and were imbued with historical narratives and spiritual energy. This is consistent with findings from Obala (O.I; 19/06/2025) who emphasizes the sacred nature of these staff, stating that they were never to be handled by ordinary people. Sages also wore sashes or belts made from woven fiber or leather. These belts sometimes held pouches containing medicinal herbs, charms, or sacred objects used in healing or divination (KNA/MFN/MAC/291/33/MID;1921). According to Hadot (1995) and Aparasia (KII; 14/06/2025), the contents of these pouches were only known to the sage and played a crucial role in their function as healers. Odundo (KII; 16/05/2025) reiterated that these belts also served as indicators of rank and role within the sages' hierarchy.

During formal gatherings or conflict resolution ceremonies, sages often wore cloaks or caps made from animal skin or bark cloth, sometimes dyed with natural pigments. These garments, as noted by Wagumba (KII;13/05/2025), were large and flowing, creating a majestic appearance that commanded respect. Their presence in such attire marked the seriousness of the occasion and the authority vested in their counsel, such dressing code also evolved slightly based on the function being performed (KNA/MFN/SL/025/1714/MUS). For instance, during burial rites, sages wore mourning beads and darker tones to align with the spiritual gravity of death. Owade (KII; 20/05/2025) explains that these ceremonial garments were kept in special places within the sage's homestead and only used for such significant functions. It is important to note that the dressing of sages was also a teaching tool and young apprentices often mimicked aspects of the sages' attire as they trained under them (Radhakrishnan,1953). This imitation process helped internalize the roles and responsibilities expected of them once they matured into sages and both emphasized the

pedagogical role of dress in transmitting culture and ethics across generations (Nyandiko,KII; 18/05/2025 and Odundo KII; 16/05/2025).

Interaction with Common People

Sages occupied a revered position in the social hierarchy and were treated with great respect and individuals approached them with bowed heads, often kneeling or sitting on the ground during conversation (Oruka,1991;Ogudi,O.I; 1/6/2025). Direct eye contact with the sages was avoided as a sign of respect, and the language they used was formal, rich with proverbs, metaphors and indirect speech (KNA/MFN/8681;1954). Interrupting a sage was considered a social taboo (Wagumba,KII; 13/05/2025), however Saoke (KII; 16/05/2025) disagree with wagumba (KII; 13/05/2025) by states that although sages were revered, they remained accessible to the ordinary person and people from all walks of life farmers, fishermen, mothers and warriors could approach them with their concerns. The sage's homestead was often seen as a center of wisdom, a safe space where people could seek help without fear of judgment (Saoke, KII; 16/05/2025). Despite this, sages were approached with great respect and visitors would often bring tokens of appreciation such as gourds of milk, tobacco, or millet as a sign of humility and gratitude (Odera1990).

Sages' judgments were final, rooted in deep knowledge of *chik* (law) and moral reasoning (Othim, O.I; 22/5/2025). Their wisdom served not only to address issues but to maintain cohesion and prevent future disputes and it was customary for those seeking advice or arbitration to present gifts such as goats, millet, tobacco or local brew which were not payments but expressions of respect and gratitude (Hale, 1998). The giving of gifts was also a form of spiritual transaction, acknowledging the sage's intercessory role between the living and the ancestors (Othim, O.I;22/5/202). Sages were perceived as living intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms whose utterances carried weight because they were believed to be guided by ancestral spirits and divine forces and during communal ceremonies such as harvest blessings, rainmaking or cleansing rituals, sages led prayers and libations (Onjuma, KII;31/05/2025).

Death and burial of a sage

The death of a sage was a momentous event marked by elaborate rituals and symbolic acts. As stated by Spear and Waller (1993), unlike ordinary individuals, sages were buried within their homesteads, often near the entrance or beside ancestral shrines. The burial site was considered sacred and was not to be disturbed. In some cases, trees such as *Ngou* (fig tree) were planted at the gravesite to mark the continuity of life and wisdom (Ouko, O.I; 1/06/2025). Funerals involved extensive mourning, animal sacrifices, communal singing of chaunts and ritual dances (Finnegan, 2012). Ombuga, (O.I; 30/05/2025) agree that these events lasted several days and involved visitors from across the clan and beyond additionally, the ceremonies also served as rites of passage for younger men and women, who learned from the traditions on display. The death of a sage often prompted the identification of a successor, either a son or an apprentice who had apprenticed under the sage (Spear and Waller, 1993). While not all successors attained the same level of authority, the process ensured the transmission of cultural and spiritual knowledge hence the community continued to honor the deceased sage through seasonal offerings and memorial invocations (Ouko, O.I; 1/06/2025).

Although men predominantly occupied the role of sages, certain women especially elderly widows or herbalists also attained sage-like recognition (Powers, 2007). These women, known for their expertise in healing, midwifery and marital counseling, were consulted on domestic and

reproductive matters (Beldina, O.I; 23/05/2025). They wore long, ochre-dyed garments, carried ritual gourds and were accorded a special hut in the homestead where they received visitors and influence, though less public, was significant in shaping family and community values (Susana O.I; 23/05/2025).

Proverbs and Riddles

As mentioned by Nyandiko (KII;18/05/2025), sages were revered individuals and specialists in various domains such as medicine, divination, conflict resolution, agriculture, leadership and oral literature. According to the archival documents, sages occupied pivotal positions in society as teachers, advisors and role models of both the traditional Luo leaders and the young generation because their accumulated experience and deep understanding of Luo culture made them the primary transmitters of indigenous knowledge and wisdom to the people of their time and space (KNA/MFN/ID/967/62/OGO).

Mbiti (1992), asserts that the most prominent method of knowledge transmission among the Luo sages was oral tradition. This included storytelling, proverbs (*ngech*) and riddles which were used to educate the young in an engaging and memorable way. In the words of Wagumba (KII; 13/05/2025) oral narratives often convey moral lessons, historical accounts and cultural norms. People could gather around the *duol* especially in the evening to learn more about their society and necessary skills and knowledge from the sages. The sages could take turn in instructing the people who were taught based on their gender and each gender was taught on how to be responsible fathers and mothers in the future.

According to Saoke (KII; 16/05/2025) the males were instructed by male sages on issues related to politics and how to lead the community and families as well as their boundaries whereas female were in turn taught by the female sages such as *nyamrerwa* on how to take care of families and how to raise or deliver children as well as social and economic roles. Stories such as that of Simbi Nyaima of Karachuonyo, Luanda Magere of Kano and Nyamgodho Wuod Ombare of Nyandiwa were used to teach about important virtues in life (Owade, KII; 20/05/2025).

Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship was a central method used by sages to transfer their saga to the people of their time (Mbiti, 1992 and Liech, O.I; 1/6/2025). This system, though informal, was deeply structured and respected within the social and cultural fabric of the Luo community (Olieko,KII; 20/05/2025). The process of apprenticeship ensured continuity of knowledge across generations, the preservation of cultural values and the grooming of competent successors to critical roles such as healers, diviners, counselors, craftsmen and community elders (Odundo, KII; 16/05/2025). The process often began with the sage identifying a young person who showed interest, curiosity, discipline and moral uprightness (Wagumba, KII;13/05/2025). In some instances, the community or family would recommend a child for apprenticeship based on observed behavior, spiritual signs, or dreams interpreted by diviners (Mbiti ,1992 and Owade, KII; 20/05/2025). Some apprenticeships were hereditary, where a sage's own child or close relative was groomed from a young age to inherit the knowledge (Odundo, KII;16/05/2025). In other cases, promising youth from outside the sage's lineage were selected, especially if they demonstrated exceptional dedication, moral uprightness, or showed signs of a natural calling for sage-hood and such individuals were usually integrated into the sage's homestead, where they lived, observed, listened and participated in daily rituals and teachings as explained by Owade, (KII; 20/05/2025) below;

“The medicine man could go with a young apprentices to collect herbs. After seeing the herb, the sage could stand next to it and without pointing could instruct the student that it was the herb they needed and without any form of amusement, the student would collect it as they believed that pointing or getting amused at the sight of the herb would lower the strength of the medicine or even make it ineffective” (Owade, KII;20/05/2025)

The apprentices were picked based on their abilities and most importantly based on their gender (Owade, KII; 20/05/2025). There were specific roles that could be performed by the male sages and therefore only male apprentices could be allowed to learn on how to curry them out. For instance, issues related to hunting rules and knowledge in war and raiding were specific for men, the same way the female apprentices were trained on how to deliver babies and even how treat infertility especially among women mean while it was almost impossible to get a man or a woman learning skills meant for the other gender in the traditional Luo community (Odiko, O.I; 13/5/2025).

However, there were some universally roles and skills which were taught to both the male and female apprentices (Ogallo, KII; 19/05/2025). Skills and roles such as herbal treatments, invoking of the ancestral spirits, anointing of leaders and resource management were considered universal to all genders (Saoke, KII; 16/05/2025). It is important to note that before these rituals or ceremonies were undertaken, the sages had an important role in educating the initiates on their responsibilities and about adult hood (Ogot, 1967). Odundo (KII; 15/05/2025) adds that it was only after the initiate had acquired all the necessary skills was, he or she initiated. Sages would instruct initiates on social responsibilities, clan history, sexual ethics and community values (KNA/DC/EN/1/3/3/1;1953). Notably, the moment a lady had started ovulating, their grandmothers had a crucial role in teaching them on how to behave, how to dress and or how to interact with the male during such periods as well as when to engaged in coitus (KNA/MFN/SL/025/1714/MUS).

Ceremonies such as *Tero buru* (connecting with the ancestors) were a crucial learning moment and people could be sent with large herds of cattle to the community river banks or *thim* (forest) where they were guided by the sages on how to offer sacrifice to the spirits and how to call to the dead by chanting their names (Odundo, KII; 15/05/2025). Naming ceremonies were also crucial as in the process the child's name was picked after chanting the names of the dead relatives by the sages in order to pick the name of the baby (Ochieng, 1975). The child could continue crying until the appropriate name of the ancestor was mentioned during such occasions. (Beldina, O.I; 23/05/2025)

Music and Dances

Sages composed and performed songs that encapsulated moral, social, historical and even philosophical teachings. These songs were typically performed during communal gatherings such as initiation ceremonies, weddings, funerals and storytelling events (Ochieng, 1975). Within the rhythmic structure and poetic language, messages were carefully encoded by the sages to guide behavior and preserve societal values and such songs promoted moral instruction by emphasizing virtues such as honesty (*adiera*), respect and generosity (Ong'ayo, 2009). The wisdom embedded in these songs helped shape individual character and uphold communal ethics of the pre-modern Luo community and some are still useful to the present society (KNA/PC/NZA/2/1/22;1932). In

relation to music context, a sage such as Weke Jakolenya, a Luo singer of songs sang *mer mer tee* and *kimaya timmii* where he stated the importance of moderation in everything as at the end the results are often the same and criticized the proud. Were (2004), explains that before George Ramogi formed his own band, he was inspired by pioneering Luo Nyatiti players and guitarists like Ochieng Kabaselleh and Collela Mazee, who were among the earliest to fuse traditional Luo rhythms with modern instruments such as the guitar, accordion and drums, George Ramogi was influenced and became a sage who promoted the education of girlchild at the time when all other musicians only recognized the social beauty of females. In the words his song, entitled Beldina Alice Anyango he sung. *Kanyako osomo gima ber ahinhya*, (Loosely translated to; If a girl studies, it's a good thing for the community,)

In the assertion of (Were,2004 and Nyandiko,KII;18/05/2025) George Ramogi sung this at a time when society was oblivious about the girl child education, when most singers produced songs that only praised the beauty of ladies and how best they could take care of their husbands and homestead which later became a government clarion call to champion the girlchild education and even come up with policies that have led to development of education for all.

Dances accompanied songs in many ritual and social events, creating an interactive and memorable learning experience and the movements, formations and rhythms of these dances were symbolic, conveying lessons on social roles, maturity and community expectations (Owade, KII; 20/05/2025). In the archival documentaries, during initiations, dances were performed to communicate ideals such as bravery, discipline and responsibility (KNA/MFN/SL/025/1714/MUS). In this context, sages guided the performance and interpretation of each movement, making the dance an encoded lesson in adulthood and communal identity (Owade, KII; 20/05/2025). Dances also reinforced gender roles and social responsibilities where Boys and girls participated in distinct dances that subtly taught them what was expected of them as future men and women in the society hence through dance, they learned values such as leadership, fidelity and hard work (KNA/MFN/SL/025/1714/MUS;1954).

Social Roles of Sages

Sages in pre-modern Luo society were central figures in the maintenance of moral and cultural norms. Their wisdom was considered a repository of communal values, and they served as guardians of tradition and arbiters of social conduct as well as the heartbeat of wisdom in the village (Mbiti, 1991 and Wagumba, KII;13/05/2025). In the understanding of Muga (KII;20/05/2025) sages were:

“Were the keepers of our customs, our history, our taboos and our stories. They guided people, taught the young and reminded the adults of their responsibilities. In their words lived the past and, in their counsel, rested the future. They were the main custodians of oral traditions, including historical narratives, genealogies, folklore, proverbs and songs”. (Muga,KII; 20/05/2025).

In the Ogot (1967), storytelling and oral performances preserved and transmitted cultural values and history to younger generations. In clans such as Kanyamua and Karachuonyo (Muga,KII;20/05/2025), recalls that sages would convene in communal gatherings to recount the migration stories of the Luo from Bahr el Ghazal, embedding valuable lessons in these tales.

In the same note, Wiredu, 1998 and Ochieng 1992, agrees that in a society where formal judicial systems were absent, sages played a vital role as mediators and arbiters in disputes ranging from family disagreements to clan conflicts and that their judgments were respected because they were perceived as impartial experienced and wise. Additionally, Owade (KII; 20/05/2025), explains that in cases involving land boundaries or marital disagreements, elders from families sought the counsel of sages, who mediated based on customary laws and patterns. According to (KNA/MFN/8681; 1954) when people quarreled whether it was a land dispute or a marriage gone sour it was the wise individuals who were brought in when all attempts had failed since such people did not take sides as they settled disputes.

Sages spoke in proverbs and stories, allowing both parties to see their errors without shame as their voices had the power to restore peace because it was the voice of truth wrapped in wisdom (Nyandiko, KII 18/05/2025). When someone broke a serious taboo like incest, theft from a sacred place or murder, the sage did not shame them publicly instead led the cleansing rituals and ensured the right reparations were made (Owade, KII; 20/05/2025). Moreover, sages explained why the act was a taboo for the community to understand the danger not just on the individual but to the whole village therefore, sages were the guardians of both justice and peace restoration as they understood the rhythms of the spirit world and advised people on how to live in harmony with the living and the dead (Olieko, KII; 20/05/2025).

As stated by Mutiso and Rohio (1975), sages would caution against disturbing ancestral sites or disrespecting the dead, they also interpret dreams, calm restless spirits as well as advising on offerings to ancestors apart from reminding the community that the world of living and the dead was one. Hence harmony and that it was a taboo to disturb the natural order of events at any moment. In the analysis of Gyekye (1987), sages served as informal educators by mentoring the youth in societal values, responsibilities and life skills they did this through rites of passage such as *nago lak* and guided young people on acceptable social behavior, communal responsibilities and gender roles, thus ensuring the continuity of social norms and cohesion.

Marriage and family life were also greatly influenced by the wisdom of sages as they advised on courtship, dowry negotiations and marital responsibilities, ensuring that unions were formed based on cultural expectations and communal harmony (Odundo, KII; 15/05/2025). Additionally, sages played an advisory role in rites of passage, guiding youths through initiations that prepared them for adulthood and leadership roles (Ocholla, 1976). Sages used songs and other methods to provide education to the younger generation and to preserve Luo culture (Were, 1968). Sages such Olima Anditi, a musician who composed and produced *Winy Neno*, a song in which Olima listed the name of all known birds among the Luo which up today, is used as a reference by the scholars seeking to understand the Luo culture and language (Nyandiko, KII; 18/05/2025). George Ramogi also produced *Belinda* a song in which he acknowledged the importance of a girl child's education at a time when society did not value education, especially on a girl. At the time of production, most singers were singing girls based on their beauty while Ramogi produced a song that encouraged the Luo people to start the process of educating the girl child in Homabay county (Were, 1968).

Economic Roles of Sages

Mbiti (1991) and Mboya (1938), affirms that sages influenced the economic structure of pre-modern Luo society through their role in resource management, labor organizations and knowledge of traditional technologies as they possessed knowledge of weather patterns, crop cycles and animal behavior, which they used to advise communities on when to plant, harvest or

move livestock. Giving example to the areas in areas near Lake Victoria such as Mbita and Suba, Wagumba (KII;13/05/2025) posits that sages could predict seasonal changes by observing natural signs and celestial movements, enhancing productivity and food security.

According to Gyekye (1987) the sages contributed to economic stability by guiding the communal use of resources such as grazing land and fishing zones as well as enforcing communal agreements in spite of mediated resource disputes so as to preventing conflicts that could disrupt economic activities. In the words of Nyandiko (KII;18/05/2025), clans such as Kaksingri and Gwassii were helped by the sages to allocate land and resolve disputes involving fishing territories. Among the Luo, livestock, particularly cattle, goats and sheep, were key to wealth, prestige and survival. Thereby sages were instrumental in advising on animal care such as disease management, grazing routes and breeding practices (Ogallo, KII; 19/05/2025). Sages also performed rituals to protect herds from misfortunes and diseases. For instance, Olieko (KII; 20/05/2025), explains that sages in Gembe region in Suba would lead in cleansing rituals (*kingo jamni*) when livestock epidemics struck, believing such events were spiritual in nature. Sages also acted as arbiters in livestock disputes, especially in matters of dowry payment or theft accusations, ensuring that economic transactions related to livestock were anchored in justice and customary law which were well understood by them and would constantly be consulted on such issues. (Saake, KII; 16/05/2025). In the assertion of Nyandiko (KII;18/05/2025) in the economic role of sages, he says that;

“In case of locust attack, Ajwang Wuon Yath winy could use his powers to direct the locust out of our land. He had the knowledge to call birds from the sky into the land to eat all the army worms which would have destroyed our crops. His knowledge over these issues earned him respect in all of Luo communities and they could go to him anytime they had problems related to planting, pest control and even harvesting.” (Nyandiko, KII;18/05/2025)

Trade among the Luo and neighboring communities such as the Abasuba and Abagusii was often facilitated by sages, who acted as guarantors of peace and trust. They promoted craftsmanship by encouraging skills such as pottery, blacksmithing and weaving and ensured that these skills were transmitted across generations (Odundo, KII; 16/05/2025). Although long-distance trade was not as advanced in all parts of Homabay by 1895, local barter economies thrived as sages often acted as mediators in trade negotiations, especially when goods were exchanged between clans as where sages advised on the value of items like hides, iron tools, grains and fish (KNA/MFN/9823;1972). In Rusinga Island, where fishing dominated, Olieko (KII; 20/05/2025), states that it was the sages who ensured that fishing tools were distributed fairly and that communal access to the lake was also preserved and warned against overfishing, linking spiritual displeasure to ecological imbalance. According to Sofola (1973) Luo sages played a key role in economic planning and trade by advising communities on resource management, fishing and agriculture. For instance, sages guided communities on the sustainable use of Lake Victoria's resources, ensuring long term food security (KNA/MFN/19077; 1954).

Political Roles of Sages

Politically, sages were instrumental in governance, leadership legitimization and maintenance of order in pre-modern Luo society. Although the Luo did not have a centralized monarchy, political authority was exercised through clan-based leadership (KNA/PC/NZA/2/1/22; 1932). As

examined by Mboya (1938), sages served as advisors to these leaders, influencing decisions on matters such as warfare, alliances and justice, their counsel was based on communal welfare and customary law and the chief or council of elders would not make a serious decision without first seeking the ear of the sage.

Sages could not be easily swayed by riches or politics as their words came from deep thought and experience, their role was to remind the leaders not just what was lawful but what was right according to the traditions of *juok* (the spirit) and the ways of the Luo ancestors (KNA/MFN/8681, 1954). In regions like Wasare of Ndhiwa and Kabuoch, clan heads often consulted sages before making decisions affecting the community (Saoke, KII; 16/05/2025).

Gyekye (1987), affirms that sages played a critical role in the formulation, interpretation and enforcement of customary law and their decisions on legal matters, such as compensation for wrongs, were binding and helped maintain law and order they also ensured justice was restorative rather than punitive, which promoted harmony. Sages played an advisory role in the political hierarchy of the Luo society even though they were not formal leaders, their experience and wisdom earned them a seat close to power (KNA/MFN/ID/967/62/OGO;1954). Clan elders, warriors and community leaders often sought their counsel on matters ranging from succession, territorial disputes, inter-clan relationships and communal decisions where their advice was not only grounded in experience but also in a deep understanding of Luo customs and traditions (Liech, O.I; 1/6/2025). By offering well-reasoned, non-partisan guidance, sages helped ensure that political decisions were aligned with communal values and maintained harmony within and between clans (Saoke, KII; 16/05/2025).

Conflict resolution was one of the most vital political contributions of sages, when tensions arose within families, clans and even among age-sets, sages acted as impartial mediators their ability to listen, understand underlying causes and suggest fair solutions made them essential in avoiding physical confrontations and bloodshed (Sofola,1973). Sages employed the art of dialogue, using proverbs, storytelling and diplomacy to convince warring parties to compromise. Hence their presence in conflict settings often calmed emotions and restored peace, earning them trust as custodians of justice and societal balance (Obala, O.I; 19/06/2025). During the wars of expeditions sages such as Nyakiti Kogutu of Karachuonyo would be consulted before the war was declared, his knowledge of wars and cleansing rituals could guarantee their people success (Nyandiko, KII;18/05/2025). Their council was highly valued by the people and even the council of elders, sages were indispensable during peace negotiation between the Luo of Homabay and other communities and even at the time when the White men arrived in the Luo community (KNA/PC/NZA/2/1/22;1932).

Sages like Ajwang Wuon Yath Winy was the leader of the negotiation between the Luo of Kendu Bay region and the white men when they first landed in Luo land in the early years (Nyandiko, KII;18/05/2025). In the absence of written laws, sages were the living libraries of Luo customary law since they were well-versed in *chike* (laws) and *kwero* (taboo) which governed everything in the traditional society, their knowledge was also critical in interpreting and enforcing these unwritten laws during political deliberations (Ogutu, O.I; 16/06/2025). During community gatherings, sages clarified points of tradition when disputes arose, ensuring that resolutions were not only just culturally acceptable, but their authority in legal matters also made them indispensable to the political and judicial processes of the time (Nyandiko, KII;18/05/2025). In the Luo community, leaders could not claim full authority without the moral and ritual endorsement

of the sages as their blessings were viewed as a form of divine and ancestral approval (Obala, O.I; 19/06/2025).

When leaders overstepped their boundaries or made unpopular decisions, sages were among the first to speak out as they used traditional forums and refined warnings often couched in proverbs or historical parallels to criticize and caution leaders furthermore, their role as informal critics helped prevent tyranny, favoritism and unjust governance (Mboya, 1938). Their interventions reminded leaders of their duty to serve the people and uphold cultural values (Saoke, KII; 16/05/2025). Sages presided over ceremonies that introduced new leaders, performed cleansing rituals and invoked ancestral spirits to protect and guide the new office bearers, this process of legitimization ensured that leaders were not only politically chosen but also spiritually accepted without this, leaders risked being rejected by the community or faced resistance to their rule (KNA/DC/EN/3/2/2;1955). The sages represented the Luo people in the clan councils where they acted as the voice of the common people and their participation ensured that grassroots concerns were raised and addressed during political discussions where they articulated the views of the silent majority and those who lacked status or eloquence to speak publicly (Nyandiko, KII;18/05/2025). This representative role helped bridge the gap between leadership and the people, making governance more inclusive, by advocating for fairness, tradition and justice, sages contributed to the accountability of leaders to their constituents (Odundo, KII; 15/05/2025). Through their political roles, sages reinforced social norms and ensured the community's unity during periods of transition or crisis, hence their involvement in reconciliation processes, peace-making rituals and succession planning helped avert potential conflicts (Nyandiko, KII; 18/05/2025).

Social Roles of Sages

Sages in pre-modern Luo society were central figures in the maintenance of moral and cultural norms. Their wisdom was considered a repository of communal values, and they served as guardians of tradition and arbiters of social conduct as well as the heartbeat of wisdom in the village (Mbiti, 1991 and Wagumba, KII;13/05/2025). In the understanding of Muga(KII;20/05/2025) sages were:

“Were the keepers of our customs, our history, our taboos and our stories. They guided people, taught the young and reminded the adults of their responsibilities. In their words lived the past and, in their counsel, rested the future. They were the main custodians of oral traditions, including historical narratives, genealogies, folklore, proverbs and songs”. (Muga,KII; 20/05/2025).

In the Ogot (1967), storytelling and oral performances preserved and transmitted cultural values and history to younger generations. In clans such as Kanyamua and Karachuonyo (Muga,KII;20/05/2025), recalls that sages would convene in communal gatherings to recount the migration stories of the Luo from Bahr el Ghazal, embedding valuable lessons in these tales.

In the same note, Wiredu,1998 and Ochieng 1992, agrees that in a society where formal judicial systems were absent, sages played a vital role as mediators and arbiters in disputes ranging from family disagreements to clan conflicts and that their judgments were respected because they were perceived as impartial experienced and wise. Additionally, Owade (KII; 20/05/2025), explains that in cases involving land boundaries or marital disagreements, elders from families sought the

counsel of sages, who mediated based on customary laws and patterns. According to (KNA/MFN/8681; 1954) when people quarreled whether it was a land dispute or a marriage gone sour it was the wise individuals who were brought in when all attempts had failed since such people did not take sides as they settled disputes.

Sages spoke in proverbs and stories, allowing both parties to see their errors without shame as their voices had the power to restore peace because it was the voice of truth wrapped in wisdom (Nyandiko, KII 18/05/2025). When someone broke a serious taboo like incest, theft from a sacred place or murder, the sage did not shame them publicly instead led the cleansing rituals and ensured the right reparations were made (Owade, KII; 20/05/2025). Moreover, sages explained why the act was a taboo for the community to understand the danger not just on the individual but to the whole village therefore, sages were the guardians of both justice and peace restoration as they understood the rhythms of the spirit world and advised people on how to live in harmony with the living and the dead (Olieko, KII; 20/05/2025).

As stated by Mutiso and Rohio (1975), sages would caution against disturbing ancestral sites or disrespecting the dead, they also interpret dreams, calm restless spirits as well as advising on offerings to ancestors apart from reminding the community that the world of living and the dead was one. Hence harmony and that it was a taboo to disturb the natural order of events at any moment. In the analysis of Gyekye (1987), sages served as informal educators by mentoring the youth in societal values, responsibilities and life skills they did this through rites of passage such as *nago lak* and guided young people on acceptable social behavior, communal responsibilities and gender roles, thus ensuring the continuity of social norms and cohesion.

Marriage and family life were also greatly influenced by the wisdom of sages as they advised on courtship, dowry negotiations and marital responsibilities, ensuring that unions were formed based on cultural expectations and communal harmony (Odundo, KII; 15/05/2025). Additionally, sages played an advisory role in rites of passage, guiding youths through initiations that prepared them for adulthood and leadership roles (Ocholla, 1976). Sages used songs and other methods to provide education to the younger generation and to preserve Luo culture (Were, 1968). Sages such Olima Anditi, a musician who composed and produced *Winy Neno*, a song in which Olima listed the name of all known birds among the Luo which up today, is used as a reference by the scholars seeking to understand the Luo culture and language (Nyandiko, KII; 18/05/2025). George Ramogi also produced *Belinda* a song in which he acknowledged the importance of a girl child's education at a time when society did not value education, especially on a girl. At the time of production, most singers were singing girls based on their beauty while Ramogi produced a song that encouraged the Luo people to start the process of educating the girl child in Homabay county (Were, 1968).

Economic Roles of Sages

Mbiti (1991) and Mboya (1938), affirms that sages influenced the economic structure of pre-modern Luo society through their role in resource management, labor organizations and knowledge of traditional technologies as they possessed knowledge of weather patterns, crop cycles and animal behavior, which they used to advise communities on when to plant, harvest or move livestock. Giving example to the areas in areas near Lake Victoria such as Mbita and Suba, Wagumba (KII; 13/05/2025) posits that sages could predict seasonal changes by observing natural signs and celestial movements, enhancing productivity and food security.

According to Gyekye (1987) the sages contributed to economic stability by guiding the communal use of resources such as grazing land and fishing zones as well as enforcing communal agreements

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2. CONCLUSION

Study reveals that sages among the pre-modern Luo of Homa Bay County played vital roles that transcended mere advisory capacities. Socially, they were custodians of moral values oral traditions and cultural rites such as initiation, marriage and funerary practices. They ensured the transmission of communal identity and cohesion through storytelling, proverbs and dispute resolution mechanisms that emphasized reconciliation and harmony. Economically, sages advised on land use, seasonal agricultural practices, fishing schedules, fair distribution of communal resources and aided in controlling pest such as *det bonyo* (locust). They also mediated trade relations and helped regulate barter systems, ensuring that economic activities aligned with communal welfare and environmental sustainability. Politically, sages functioned as intermediaries between clan leaders and the people, influencing decisions on leadership succession, inter-clan alliances and warfare. Their counsel was highly respected in council gatherings and their insights often determined the direction of major political actions.

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