



Assessment of the Role of Christian Missionaries in the Educational Transformation of Rumuruti Sub-County of Laikipia County, Kenya, 1890-2010

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Abstract

Christian missionaries in Rumuruti Sub-county of Laikipia County, Kenya played a pioneer role in the educational transformation of the community. Despite initial hostile resistance from the community, the missionary effort slowly but surely gained ground and left a great mark in the society. The region was largely inaccessible and far off from the main settlement area of Nyahururu, which was the centre of white settler farms in Laikipia County. The missionaries introduced formal education in the Sub-county, which has had tremendous impact on the local people. The objective of this study is to examine the role of Christian missionaries in the educational transformation of Rumuruti Sub County of Laikipia County, Kenya. The study adopted a historical research design. The study was informed by Modernization theory. The theory postulates that changes occur when a traditional society adopts modern technological and social practices of an advanced society. The study used purposive sampling technique in selecting the sample size of 100 respondents who were knowledgeable about mission work in Rumuruti Sub-county. Primary data was collected by use of questionnaires and interview schedules. In addition, data was accessed from the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Centre in Nairobi and Church Mission Archives. The study findings demonstrate that Christian Missionaries have contributed to educational transformation of Rumuruti Sub County. The findings of the study enrich the historiography of missionary activities in Kenya.

Keywords: Christianity, Formal education, Missionary, Transformation

Introduction

European Christian missionaries were instrumental in the introduction of formal education in much of Africa from the late 19th century. European Missionary Societies not only played the role of changing the way of life of Africans but were also pressuring their governments to facilitate evangelism (Sundkler & Steed, 2000; Miller, 2025). Missionary Societies were driven by the firm belief that their work would transform African societies by promoting Western education, health care and evangelism.

Christianity has made a significant contribution in the genesis and continued development of formal western education and general social change in Africa. Pioneer European missionaries met numerous challenges in their evangelization efforts (Baur, 2020; Miller, 2025). Christian missionaries realised that to effectively carry out evangelization activities, there was need to promote literacy among the African (Gehman, 2020). Protestant churches, for instance, were proponents of mass education, because of their emphasis on the necessity for all believers to read the Bible in their own languages (Baur, 2020; Woodberry & Shah, 2004). David Livingstone, a pioneer explorer and missionary believed that Christianity would provide principles for moral guidance, while legitimate commerce and education would encourage Africans to produce their own trade goods from their land to exchange with Europeans (Eaton, 2020; Nkomazana, 1998).

Missionary work in Kenya was pioneered by Ludwig Krapf and Johann Rebman of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1844 and 1846, respectively (Gichina, 2020; Gichumbi, 2007). These “pioneers” established a mission at Rabai in Mombasa. Their main objective at that time was to introduce Christianity into the interior of East Africa (Gichina, 2020; Gichumbi, 2007). Western Christianity and education in Kenya thus emanated from the work of Krapf and Rebman (Bogonko, 1992). The completion of the construction of the Kenya - Uganda Railway whose construction started in 1896 from Mombasa and reached Port Florence (Kisumu) in 1901 facilitated easy movement of Christian missionaries to the interior of East Africa.



The Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) (the present-day Presbyterian Church of East Africa-PCEA) started its activities in Kenya in 1891. The Church set up a station at Kibwezi, and was actively involved in the establishment of schools for the local people in the country (Gichumbi, 2007). It is worth noting that missionaries' role in education went hand in glove with evangelical work. Initially schools were situated in churches or mission stations where formal instruction was given to African converts. Generally, western education and western medical services were offered to Africans as an incentive to accept Christianity (Gichina, 2020). Missionary education also aimed to impart relevant agricultural and manual skills to the Africans, promote settler farming, to give African technical skills to improve their industrial knowledge, to offer basic literacy skills to enable Africans to read the Bible and carry out simple arithmetic and to train Africans as catechists to enhance the spread of Christianity (Gichina, 2020; Omachar, 2018; Miller, 2025).

Africa Inland Mission (AIM) had its beginning in the work of Peter Cameron Scott (1867-1896), a Scottish-American missionary of the International Missionary Alliance who served two years in the Congo before he relocated to Scotland in 1892 because of illness (Gehman, 2020). Scott recruited a number of individuals in Philadelphia, USA who were willing to return with him to Africa to start missionary work. The mission comprised workers in the field and was expected to be entirely self-governing and independent of the Philadelphia Missionary Council (Young III, 2017). On August 17, 1895, AIM's first mission group comprising Peter Cameroon Scott, his sister Margaret, Frederick W. Krieger, Willis Hotchkiss, Minnie Lindberg, Miss Reckling, Lester Severn and Walter M. Wilson set off for East Africa. They arrived in Mombasa in October of the same year. Within a year, the mission had established four stations—at Nzaui, Sakai, Kilungu, and Kangundo, all in Kenya. More workers came from America, including Scott's parents, and the pioneer group expanded to fifteen. Key pioneer AIM missionaries in Kenya included C.T. Studd, Lee Downing, Carl Becker, Toni Collins, Willis Hotchkiss, Erik Barnett and Jonathan Hildebrant (Gehman, 2020).

Following the death of Scott, Hurlburt was appointed director of the mission. He and his family moved to Africa and for over 20 years through charismatic leadership he led the mission to greater heights and established a mission in 1903 at Kijabe, Kenya. Hurlburt advocated the need for the mission to work hand in hand with converts to create a strong indigenous church (Young III, 2017, p. 30). In 1906 he moved AIC Headquarters from Ukambani to Kijabe where the government had donated 2500-acre piece of land. He also established Rift Valley Academy at Kijabe. In 1926 the mission built a station at Kabartonjo in the Rift Valley where one of its early converts was Daniel Arap Moi, who later became Kenya's Vice President and President. In the period 1926 to 1939 Lee Harper Dawning was the AIM field director. He and colleagues established additional 100 churches in Kenya (Young III, 2017, p.42) although most churches were run by African converts.

AIM expanded rapidly in Kenya e.g. 58 churches in the 1930s, 108 churches in the 1940s and 243 churches in the 1950s (Gehman, 2020). Majority of these churches were established by African converts. AIM in Africa operated under the motto 'simplicity, authority and unity' (Young III, 2017, p. 65). AIM was a non-denominational faith mission.

AIM embarked on the establishment of Mission centres to facilitate evangelization (Gehman, 2020; Young III, 2017, p.42). Among the very first schools in Kenya started by AIC Missionaries were located in the AIC mission centres such as Kibwezi, Taveta and Kijabe. The goal was to encourage evangelization of children in the course of teaching them literacy and numerical skills. Western-style schools thus became major avenues for both evangelization and dissemination of Western culture (Njoroge, 1998, p. 95). Soon, however, as the benefits of Western-style education began to bear obvious fruits, the demand for it increased.

Rumuruti Sub County is approximately 40 kilometres due north from Nyahururu on the Nyahururu Maralal road. The region was in a strategic position and this attracted the attention of Christian missionaries who came to the former Rift Valley region from 1878. Rumuruti, the then headquarters of Laikipia District following the establishment of colonial rule in Kenya became the stop point of the numerous church groups such as Church Missionary Society as well as the establishment of many Catholic Churches, AIC churches and PCEA churches in the region (Njoroge, 1998, p.100). Rumuruti derived its name from corruption of the phrase "remote route" due to the poor road conditions linking it to Nyahururu, the white settlers' bastion (Njoroge, 1998). Laikipia County was the epicentre land alienation for European settlement which had contributed to the forceful displacement of thousands of Maasai families from their land.

Research Methodology



This study adopted a historical research design to collect, verify, and synthesize historical evidence from the past to establish facts about the phenomenon under study. The historical method is appropriate in establishing facts so as to arrive at conclusions concerning past events and demonstrate their relevance to the society (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Shanguhya, 1996, p.24). The study was conducted in Rumuruti Sub-County, located in Laikipia County. This area was selected due to the high concentration of Christian missionary mission centres within the sub-county.

The study sought to examine how Christian missionaries contributed to educational transformation in Rumuruti Sub-County. The target population for this study comprised individuals and institutions that have been directly or indirectly impacted by the activities of Christian missionaries in Rumuruti Sub-County of Laikipia County. This includes local community members especially elderly residents and offspring of early Christian converts who possess first hand or inherited knowledge of the missionaries' influence on education in the area. Also included are religious leaders and members of churches founded by missionaries, such as the Africa Inland Church (AIC), Roman Catholic who could provide insights into the missionary legacies. Educators affiliated with institutions that originated as mission centres were also another key segment of the population. Other informers included local administrators and national government officers working in the region.

The study employed purposive sampling, and snowball sampling procedures in identifying the respondents conversant with the study topic (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Mugenda & Mugenda, 2009). These comprised educators, pastors, church elders and active church members who were knowledgeable about missionary contributions to education in the area. The study engaged a total of 100 respondents, based on accessibility and the need for in-depth qualitative data. This study employed a combination three research instrument namely: questionnaires, interview schedules, and an observational checklist, each selected based on the nature and objectives of the research. First, the questionnaire was the primary data collection tool and was used to gather information from respondents affiliated with mission schools, churches, and hospitals within Rumuruti Sub-County.

Secondly, the study utilized interview schedules to collect qualitative data from elderly community members, many of whom either could not read or write, or were more comfortable with oral communication. These individuals were identified through purposive and snowball sampling and were selected due to their historical knowledge and lived experience concerning missionary work in the region (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). The interviews were conducted face-to-face by the researcher and research assistant by ensuring that the questions were clearly explained and responses accurately recorded. The use of interviews made it possible for in-depth exploration of the missionaries' role in education in the region. Lastly, an observational checklist was used to assess the current state of physical infrastructure of mission-established schools. This tool made it possible for the researcher to verify and document the physical evidence of missionary contributions to educational development in Rumuruti Sub-County. In addition, data was also collected from Kenya National Archives and Documentation Centre in Nairobi, missionary diaries, letters and church minutes. Secondary sources included published books, thesis and journals articles.

The collected data from both primary and secondary sources was subjected to vigorous process of verification and justification (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Mugenda & Mugenda, 2009). The process involved comparison of selected data to validate its reliability. The data was qualitatively analysed in order to set out the detailed responses about the observed events as well as meaningfully describing the distribution of the respondent's opinion on the missionary transformation of Rumuruti Sub-County in Laikipia County. The qualitative responses information from the respondents was categorised into themes and sub themes. The data was arranged in line with the study objectives (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2009). Data from various sources was corroborated by comparing it with other sources of information. The data was then analysed and results were presented. The data was interpreted according to the objectives and research questions of the study.

Discussion and Findings

The first Africa Inland Mission (AIM) missionary in Laikipia was John Stauffacher who arrived in 1903 (Gehman, 2020; Rigby, 1981, p. 114). He later relocated to Kijabe. The other early AIM missionary in Rumuruti was Albert Edward Barnet and his wife Elizabet Nicher Anderssen who came in 1907. He had earlier served in Karbarnet among the Tugen of Baringo. These pioneer missionaries laid the foundation for the establishment of



mission schools, churches, and hospitals, which would later have great impact on the socio-economic life of the area.

Before the arrival of missionaries, the local African communities were masters of their destiny and the local environment based on their indigenous practices. The African communities who lived in the area included the Agikuyu and the Maasai. The Agikuyu were largely agriculturalists while the Maasai were pastoralists. With the arrival of missionaries, traditional way of life began to change. The introduction of formal schooling and religious observances required communities to adapt to structured routines and schedules. For instance, mission schools introduced weekly timetables with fixed learning hours and designated school days, replacing the informal and season-based activities of yonder. Missionaries taught learners to observe a seven-day week, with five days dedicated to schooling and the seventh day (Sunday) reserved for worship (Njoroge, 2023). Overall, the arrival of missionaries in Rumuruti Sub-County marked the beginning of a profound social transformation, challenging long-held traditions and introducing new ways of thinking, living, and organizing society. Through schools the Christian missionaries reoriented local communities promoted a new cultural identity.

According to oral testimonies and church records, the first mission school in Rumuruti and the region was initiated by the Africa Inland Mission (AIM). Although the structures were basic they had monumental impact on the society. Their work laid the foundation for later government involvement in education in the country. This is evident in the establishment of mission schools such as Rumuruti Catholic Primary School, PCEA Tumaini Academy, and AIC Ng'arua Mission. These institutions provided accessible formal education at a time when such opportunities were limited, especially in rural areas. The missionary schools offered academic education as well as vocational skills training, which empowered Africans to partake in various economic activities.

Christian missionaries played a significant role in addressing the acute shortage of teachers in Laikipia County, including Rumuruti Sub County, by establishing teacher training institutions. One notable example was the PCEA Tumaini Teachers' Training College, which became instrumental in training African educators who served both formal schools and informal 'bush schools'. These missionary-established colleges offered Africans the opportunity to acquire professional teaching skills, enabling them to not only serve in missionary schools but also to start independent schools that addressed the educational needs of African communities. Apart from academic instruction, these institutions served as centres for nurturing leadership and political awareness, contributing to the emergence of African nationalism. By 1946, a structured teacher training system had been implemented across the region, including Rumuruti, featuring three levels of certification: Grade III for entry-level teachers, Grade II for intermediate-level instructors, and Grade I for senior educators and future school leaders. This system created a clear career progression for African teachers and strengthened the foundation of formal education in Laikipia County.

The study indicated that the establishment of mission schools have aided in enhancing the literacy level in the region. The respondents pointed out that missionaries transformed the education landscape of Rumuruti Sub County. Prior to the arrival of missionaries, the dominant form of education among the Agikuyu and Maasai communities was traditional informal learning passed down from one generation to the next within the community environment. This education focused on cultural practices, survival skills, and moral values and was carried out informally through storytelling, observation, and participation. However, with the arrival of the Consolata Missionaries from Nyeri in 1945, a dramatic shift occurred (Njoroge, 2023). The missionaries escalated formal Western-style education, marking the beginning of a literacy revolution in the region.

One of the major transformations was the relocation of education from informal home-based settings to structured school environments. Although traditional forms of learning continued in some areas, formal education gradually became the vogue. Missionaries began establishing elementary, intermediate, and eventually secondary schools (Njoroge, 2023). For example, St. John Bosco Primary School and Rumuruti Catholic Secondary School were among the early mission-founded institutions in the region. For a number of Christian Missionaries, a symbiotic relationship existed between evangelistic and educational policy. As such, education was inseparable from Church membership hence reading, writing and arithmetic were viewed as prerequisites in the propagation of the faith, running of a self-supporting church and the desired transformation of the African society. In general, Missionaries felt that converts needed literacy to read the Bible and to serve as teachers and evangelists.

Until 1911, all African education in colonial Kenya was entirely vested in the hands of the Christian missionaries. This was due to the fact that the British government wanted the colonies to be self-sustaining to enable the



government focus more in broad economic and political affairs. Unwilling to partake in any education venture, the government had offered little support to the various missions in their educational endeavors. Within a short time, education became a sort of status symbol in the colonial structure, African convert began to demand for relevant education. It is worth noting that the inadequacy of literacy content of the same education had sharpened and whetted Africans' mental appetites to seek more secular education (Bogonko, 1992, p. 23). The 1911 Frazer Commission on Education in the East Africa Protectorate proposed the need for government-missionary cooperation whereby educational facilities for Africans be provided by mission societies in order to inculcate morality and accompanied by certain Christian instruction (Sifuna & Otiende, 2006, p. 193).

In early 1920s, for instance, clerks (*Karani*) wage rate was as high as Kshs 17/- per month, while farm laborers were earning only Ksh.3/- per month (KNA, PC/NZA/3/33/8/9, 1930., p. 1). The Africans believed that such well-paying jobs would enable them to earn cash to meet their tax obligations and satisfy their other material needs that had emerged under capitalist development in Kenya. Since education provided the most important avenue in the acquisition of better paying jobs, the Africans therefore in droves joined mission schools. Their desire was further heightened by the examples set by pioneer teacher-evangelists who were an envied group, "because of their knowledge of the White man's world" and the material acquisitions, like bicycles and better houses that pioneer converts possessed (KNA, PC/NZA/3/33/8/9, 1930, p.1).

Following the passage of the colony's first Education Ordinance in 1924, the Mission school system in Kenya was standardized into three categories: namely, Supplementary (grade 1 and 2), Elementary (grade 3 and 4) and Higher schools (Sifuna & Otiende, 2006, p. 199). The higher two categories were to be aided by the government, through the grants-in-aid system. Supplementary, or "Bush" schools, were not accredited and were, therefore, not subsidized. The Education Ordinance thus provided a system of reciprocal relationships between the mission schools, the colonial government and the Africans.

In the late 1920s, missions' efforts in implementing government policies began to pay dividends. As such, boosted by government grants-in-aid, Local Native Council's funding and the African willingness to pay school fees for their children, the educational component of the missions' activity expanded to dimensions that had been inconceivable before (Rowe, 1958, p. 161). In the 1930s the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society was operating at El Barta in Maralal under Miss Webster and Miss Grindley where 20-30 Samburu were attending the pioneer class, even though ostensibly with the idea of learning to read and write while -Africa Inland Mission was operating at Thomson Fall Township and Salvation Army had opened a centre at Rumuruti (Kenya National Archives (KNA) /DC/LKA 1/1/16 Laikipia District Annual Report 1935-45).

In the 1940s the Kikuyu in Laikipia demanded more advanced schools, at a pace that neither the government nor the missionaries could match. But in their demands and threats to establish independent schools, the Africans could not do without the support of both Christian missions and the colonial government. On the role of the church in educational transformation the key respondents articulated that it enabled Africans to value education, it led to interaction among Africans from different ethnic groups.

During and after the Second World War the bug of education increased among Africans. Yet there was no government school in the district and no assistance was extended to thousands of children in the district. Hence the mushrooming of Kikuyu Independent School Association schools in the farms. At Thomson Falls, AIM maintained their out-school which was visited at long intervals by a missionary from Eldama Ravine. Local Africans were dissatisfied with the teaching provided and requested for establishment of government school. As such, in December 1944 the County's Department of Education recommended that the Consolata Catholic Mission based in Nyeri be permitted to start a school, church etc. at Thomson Falls (KNA/AR 1945 Laikipia-Samburu District). This decision was a turning point in educational transformation of Rumuruti Sub County.

From 1954 there was simmering friction between the Protestant and Catholic Mission. This was because the Catholics were more aggressive in expansion of church and educational centres (KNA/June 1956-Handing Over Report). At the end of 1952 there were over 30,000 Kikuyu in the district but in 1953 the number had been reduced to 6,000 because of repatriation to the reserves on suspicion of supporting Mau movement (KNA/1953 Laikipia County Handing Over Report). This greatly interrupted education and evangelising in the county.

The AIM and Roman Catholic missions assisted in supervision of the District Education Board (DEB) schools since the schools had challenges of recruiting good teachers. In 1954 two farm schools were opened by AIM at

Col. C. Corbett’s farm and Mr. W.F.B. McLettan’s farm. The school at Chemuka was reopened immediately the forest squatters were screened and cleared (KNA/AR/1954/Laikipia). The school was run by AIM too.

The AIM displayed a somewhat ambivalent relationship with education (Young III, 2017). Primary education was a successful aid for the mission in its efforts to convert Africans thus “when missionaries came to a new area to build a station they often began their work by holding informal classes, telling bible stories, and teaching children how to read and write” (Young III, 2017). The churches in the village also operated during the week day as the village school. The AIM feared focusing too much on education since it could dilute its evangelical interest). Moreover, the mission believed that the educational work a potential distraction from its primary mission. As such, the mission in the 1940s lost a significant number of African membership due to mission’s unwillingness to provide more education for African children hence contributing to the emergence of African Independent schools (Young III, 2017). In 1945 due to such pressure the mission relented and accepted to change its educational policy i.e. maintain schools, making Government standards the minimum requirement. It also agreed to accept Government grants.

The attitude of AIC missionaries in the 1930s and 1940s in regard to education was described aptly as we came to preach, not to teach schools (Young III, 2017). It’s worth noting that the mission lacked adequate resources to keep up with the educational demands. By the 1940s the demand for more education had outpaced the resources of the mission. This was evident from the poor school inspector’s reports.

Africans partook in missionary education in a number of ways. First, African communities donated land, building materials and labour for construction of mission churches and schools. Without the support of African leaders that later became teachers, the CMS, Roman Catholic, and AIC missionaries in Rumuruti Sub County could not have achieved much in their work. Africans, therefore, were active recipients of educational transformation initiatives in the Sub County.

By independence, the literacy level in Laikipia District was comparatively higher than other pastoral districts as indicated in Figure 1. This can be largely attributed to the work of the various missionary groups, especially the Consolata Catholic Mission of Nyeri, which established schools in almost all corners of Laikipia District.

Table 1: Literacy Level in Selected Pastoral Districts 1979

S/No	County	Adult Population	Literate	Percentage
1.	Laikipia	67,220	27,918	32%
2.	Kajiado	75,360	20,247	18%
3.	Baringo	104,966	27,795	19.33%
4.	Elgeyo Marakwet	79,306	25,019	23.69%

Extracted from Kibet (1981), p.136

Conclusion

The article has assessed the contribution of Christian Missionaries to the educational transformation of Rumuruti Sub County of Laikipia County, Kenya. It has traced the genesis of Christian Missionary activities in the region demonstrating the pioneer mission groups such as the African Inland Mission and the Catholic Church, among others. The study contends that the principal objective of the missionary churches in Kenya and Africa in general was to convert Africans to Christianity. Consequently, western education became a handmaiden and integral part of Christianity to facilitate winning of African converts.

It is worth noting that the arrival and sustained presence of Christian missionaries significantly influenced the social life of the Rumuruti community. This transformation was most evident in education. Missionaries were instrumental in establishing schools, some of which continue to operate to this day, providing access to formal education for Africans. These educational institutions laid the groundwork for literacy, vocational training, and academic advancement, enabling local people to pursue various careers and to better their lives and that of their communities.

Overall, the study concludes that Christian missionary work acted as a catalyst for educational and social transformation in Rumuruti Sub-County. This transformation has not only improved individual lives but also contributed to the broader socio-economic development of the region.



Recommendations

Based on the study findings the study makes the following recommendations:

First, it is important that all established missionary educational institutions be preserved, supported, and protected as integral components vestiges of educational transformation of Rumuruti Sub-County and beyond. These institutions historically laid the foundation that have shaped the region's educational development over the years through their contributions to education. Preserving their infrastructure, values, and historical significance will ensure that future generations don't lose the rich positive legacy of missionary work.

Secondly, the Laikipia County Government and relevant national agencies actively collaborate with religious organizations and other stakeholders involved in the management of these institutions. Such support should include financial subsidies, infrastructural upgrades, training opportunities for staff, and technical assistance in administrative management. This will help maintain and even improve the standards of service delivery in education, more so in marginalized and rural areas of the Sub County where government presence may be limited.

Thirdly, the promotion of public-private partnerships between the government, church-based organizations, NGOs, and community groups to facilitate sustainable operations of missionary-founded institutions. Such collaboration would enhance resource mobilization, expand outreach, and improve accountability mechanisms. Finally, there is a need for the documentation and archiving of the historical contributions of missionary institutions in order to inform policy, preserve cultural heritage, and guide future development planning. Recognizing and institutionalizing the value of missionary efforts will further strengthen the social empowerment of the region and inspire continued community transformation rooted in strong educational foundations.

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