

**WOMEN'S IDENTITY AND MORAL AUTHORITY**  
**UNDER COLONIAL RULE IN KENYA**

**By Clare Catherine Buswell**

Thesis submitted to the Centre for Development Studies in the School of International Studies  
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Flinders  
University South Australia.

May 2012

## **ABSTRACT**

### **WOMEN'S IDENTITY AND MORAL AUTHORITY UNDER COLONIAL RULE IN KENYA**

This thesis examines moral authority and constructions of women's identities during colonial rule in Kenya. Women's farming and the use of moral authority gave women some control over the economic disruption and gender chaos caused by the colonial state. The thesis contextualises the conflict between colonial state controlled relationships (with chiefs, headmen, settlers) and resources (land, crops, labour, taxation) within the use made by women of the changing understandings of gender relations and marriage to diminish the modernist discourse of colonial rule over their livelihoods, behaviour and identity. This provides a deeper understanding of the power relations that stem from the use of moral authority and its articulation with identity. The fluid and at times contradictory uses of moral authority are still utilized in Kenya today, remaining strong reference points when applied to questions of land access, farming, marriage and gender relations.

## CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree of diploma in any university, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person where due reference is not made in the text.

-----  
**Clare Catherine Buswell**

-----  
**Dated:**

## SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

I believe that this thesis is properly presented, conforms to the specification for the thesis, and is of sufficient standard to be, *prima facie*, worthy of examination.

-----  
**Dr. Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes**

-----  
**Date**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge Flinders University for the funding of travel and field grants so I could pursue archival research at libraries in the United Kingdom. I would like to thank Dr Cherry Gertzel and Dr John Lonsdale for fostering a love of Kenyan history. I owe a particular debt to my supervisor Dr Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes for her invaluable discussions highlighting the complexities of gender relations and the diverse experiences of women around the globe. To Dr Richard de Angelis, for your encouragement. I would like to thank Jacqueline Buswell for proof reading the final draft. I am indebted to Heiko Maurer for his patience, encouragement and love over the years of this thesis.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
CANDIDATE’S DECLARATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	v
LIST OF TABLES AND GRAPHS .....	vii
ABBREVIATIONS .....	vii
GLOSSARY OF TERMS .....	viii
CHAPTER 1 .....	1
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Overview .....	1
Aim of the Research .....	4
Research Methods .....	5
Scope of the Research .....	7
CHAPTER TWO .....	11
CONSTRUCTIONS OF KENYAN WOMEN .....	11
Introduction .....	11
Politics of the Womb .....	15
Rebellious and Seditious Women .....	24
‘Hapless Landless Women’ .....	36
Changing Paradigms .....	44
CHAPTER THREE .....	47
WOMEN’S LABOUR AND MORAL AUTHORITY IN PRE-COLONIAL KENYA .....	47
Introduction .....	47
The Kipsigis .....	50
The Luo .....	56
The Kikuyu .....	61
The Nandi .....	69
Familial Position, Cultural Knowledge and Moral Authority .....	73
CHAPTER FOUR .....	80
WOMEN’S FARMING, LABOUR AND USURPING MEN .....	80
Introduction .....	80
The Colonial Economy: Land Alienation and Regulation .....	82
Responses to Changes in Land Ownership .....	89
The Impact of Labour Migration .....	92
Cultivation Changes .....	99
Intensifying Gender Roles .....	114
Entrenching Inequality .....	118
CHAPTER FIVE .....	122
WOMEN, LAND AND LABOUR .....	122
Introduction .....	122
Land and Labour .....	125
The Commercialisation of African Agriculture .....	127
Women’s Loss of Access to Land .....	136
Land Titling .....	142
The Marriage Wars .....	151
The New Modernity .....	161
CHAPTER SIX .....	165
WOMEN, RESISTANCE AND MORAL POWER .....	165

Introduction.....	165
Confrontations Within Marriage.....	168
Witchcraft.....	177
Converts to Christianity.....	186
The Confrontation Over Circumcision.....	193
Everyday Confrontations.....	200
Future Identities.....	207
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	210
CONCLUSION.....	210
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	218

## LIST OF TABLES AND GRAPHS

Table 1. Seed Distribution to Native Reserves 1925.	101
Table 2. Kenyan Maize Production 1912-1918.	110
Table 3. Comparison of Labour, Yield and Returns for various Crops North Nyanza, 1955.	131
Graph 1. Selected Exports from Nyanza Province. 1908–1918.	108

## ABBREVIATIONS

AR	Annual Report
CMS	Christian Missionary Society
CN	Central Nyanza
CO	Colonial Office
DC	District Commissioner
DOA	Department of Agriculture
FH	Fort Hall
IR	Intelligence Report
KCA	Kikuyu Central Association
KNA	Kenya National Archives
LNC	Local Native Council
LNT	Local Native Tribunal
MC	Miscellaneous Correspondence
NAD	Native Affairs Department
OR	Quarterly Report
PBR	Political Record Books
PC	Provincial Commissioner

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<i>ahoi</i>	Kikuyu: a tenant at will.
<i>askeche</i>	Luo: soldier, warrior.
<i>baraza</i>	public meetings.
<i>chebsogeyot:</i>	Kipsigis: a female witch doctor with only curative powers.
<i>dala</i>	Luo: the primary domestic unit essentially a compound in which a senior male, his wives and the houses of younger brothers and married sons lived.
<i>githaka</i>	Kikuyu: an individual families land.
<i>gweng</i>	Luo: neighbourhood. Similar to kokwet.
<i>irua</i>	Kikuyu: rite of initiation involving the ceremonies of circumcision, and instruction, <i>kuumithio</i> and seclusion <i>muhingo</i> .
<i>imbaret a' mossop</i>	Kipsigis: Cultivated field the produce of which belongs to the household.
<i>imbaret ab soi,</i>	Kipsigis: men's own field.
<i>kabungut</i>	Kipsigis: women's own field.
<i>kagiri ka ntichio</i>	Kikuyu: the name of a group of very old women also known as ' <i>kiama kia aka</i> ' or a 'committee of women elders'.
<i>kang'ei</i>	Kikuyu: name given to a woman whose first child has not yet been initiated and who came under the authority of a <i>nyakinyua</i> and were required to perform services to the latter in order to progress through the organizations ranks.
<i>kimiet</i>	Kipsigis: wimbi or millet flour boiled to the consistency of plum pudding. It is the main dish, and always served with boiled vegetables, milk or blood.
<i>kokwet</i>	Kipsigis: neighbourhood (pl: <i>kokwotinwek</i> ).
<i>laibon</i>	Kipsigis: seer, future teller.
<i>libamba.</i>	Luo: <i>Libamba</i> was the maximal lineage group. It was a land holding unit, consisting of a group of agnatic kinsmen who cooperated on matters of defence, farming and community cohesion.
<i>mariika</i>	Kikuyu. Age set.
<i>m'bari</i>	Kikuyu: lineage, or clan or sub clan. (pl: <i>m'bara</i> ).
<i>mboco</i>	Kikuyu: a type of maize.
<i>mogonda wakwa</i>	Kikuyu: a wife's own individual garden.
<i>mondo</i>	Luo: Man's field used to cultivate crops which he had sole control over.
<i>motiiri or nyakinyua</i>	Kikuyu: elder woman.
<i>muciarwa</i>	Kikuyu: an outsider, adopted by a landowner, given land and a wife. Muciarwa is sometimes spelt Muciarua.
<i>muguri:</i>	Kikuyu: a person given the use of land against a loan of stock.
<i>muhoi</i>	Kikuyu: landless person given land under certain conditions.



<i>mumo</i>	Kikuyu: apprentice female adolescent.
<i>muramati</i>	Kikuyu: the eldest son of the eldest branch or founder of the Mbara who is responsible for land distribution amongst other arbitration responsibilities.
<i>mutamia</i>	Kikuyu: married women (pl: <i>atumia</i> ).
<i>mwendia ruhui</i>	Kikuyu: was the father of a widow's children and was allowed usage of the land belonging to the widow's family.
<i>ndundu</i>	Kikuyu: Women's Council with organisational economic social and judicial functions.
<i>ngwatio</i>	Kikuyu: women's communal labour arrangement.
<i>ngundu</i>	Nandi: neighbourhood, compound.
<i>ngwaci</i>	Kikuyu: tubers.
<i>njahe</i>	Kikuyu: Lablab bean, favoured by pregnant women.
<i>Njuri Nceke</i>	Kikuyu: a council of elders in the Meru section of the Kikuyu Reserve.
<i>nkatha</i>	Kikuyu: the name given to young married women.
<i>nyakinyua</i>	Kikuyu: woman elder whose first child has been initiated.
<i>orgoyo</i>	Kipsigis: Men from specific clans attributed with a variety of supernatural powers.
<i>peek</i>	Millet, an important food crop.
<i>pim</i>	Luo: elderly women who instruct girls on correct social behaviour and community lore.
<i>pitet</i>	Kipsigis: law, custom and nature (pl: <i>pitonik</i> ).
<i>ponindet</i>	Kipsigis: a person who able to use an 'evil eye'.
<i>puriet</i>	Kipsigis: army.
<i>riika</i>	Kikuyu: an initiation set comprised of all men and women circumcised in a certain year. Also used to describe a generation.
<i>ruracio</i>	Kikuyu: bridewealth.
<i>shamba</i>	Cultivated plot.
<i>sigiroinet</i>	Nandi: Communal house used by young unmarried men and women, adolescents.
<i>simba</i>	Luo: communal house of unmarried men and adolescent boys.
<i>siwindhe</i>	Luo: communal girls house.
<i>thingira</i>	Kikuyu: men's hut.
<i>wiree</i> or <i>wiren sogot</i>	Kipsigis: public execution of a person who has been declared a witch or a thief.