Colonialism and the Transformation of Indigenous Leadership among the Jo-Asembo in East Asembo, Rarieda Sub-county, Siaya County, Kenya from 1898 to 1963

Richard Olwande Odo[1], Prof. Caroline Mucece Kithinji[2], Dr. Job Mulati Chebai[3]

[1]PhD in History student, Department of Humanities, Chuka University, P.O Box 109-60400, Chuka, Kenya

[2]History Lecturer, Department of Humanities, Chuka University, P.O Box 109-60400, Chuka, Kenya

[3]History Lecturer, Chuka University, P.O BOX 109– 60400, Chuka, Kenya.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000649

Received: 25 October 2026; Accepted: 30 October 2026; Published: 13 November 2026

ABSTRACT

This study was on the making of African chiefs among the Jo-Asembo in East Asembo, Rarieda sub-county, Siaya County, Kenya from 1898 to 1963. The study employed the descriptive research design. Data was obtained from oral, archival and secondary sources. The respondents were purposively sampled using snowballing technique. The study corroborated data from oral, archival and secondary sources to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. Great Man and Marxist theories were used to account for the making of African chiefs in Asembo locations. The major findings of the study were that: arrival of British colonial rule introduced a new administrative system different from the indigenous form of government that existed prior to colonialization, East Asembo location was strategic to British occupation due to its proximity to Lake Victoria, by incorporating East Asembo into the colonial structure, the British were able to formalize their administrative systems in the location, Jo-Asembo responded to colonial invasion using both resistance and collaboration, DCs expressed their frustrations regarding the challenges they faced in governing Jo-Asembo due to lack of a centralized authority, establishment of African chiefs in East Asembo became colonial invention and that Native Authority Ordinance established Native Tribunals, which provided Asembo chiefs with semi-judicial powers to address civil matters. This study concluded that the contingent, negotiated, and hybrid nature of colonial authority in East Asembo. This has left a significant legacy on governance structure among the Jo-Asembo in Rarieda sub-county, Siaya County, Kenya during the colonial period.

Keywords: Colonialism, African chiefs, Transformation, Indigenous, Leadership, Jo-Asembo, East Asembo

INTRODUCTION

The colonial alteration of indigenous authorities such as chieftainship refers to the changes imposed by colonial powers on the existing governance structures and administrative systems of colonized regions. In this view, Lugard (1922) posits that the civilizing mission was intrinsically connected to the Dual Mandate, a concept that underscored the belief that European involvement in Africa served a dual purpose in their colonies. Aundrey (1960) on the other hand highlights a critical challenge faced by East African governments at independence which was seen in the context of the transition from colonial rule to self-governance. This means that the indigenous roles of local leaders, such as chiefs were significantly transformed.

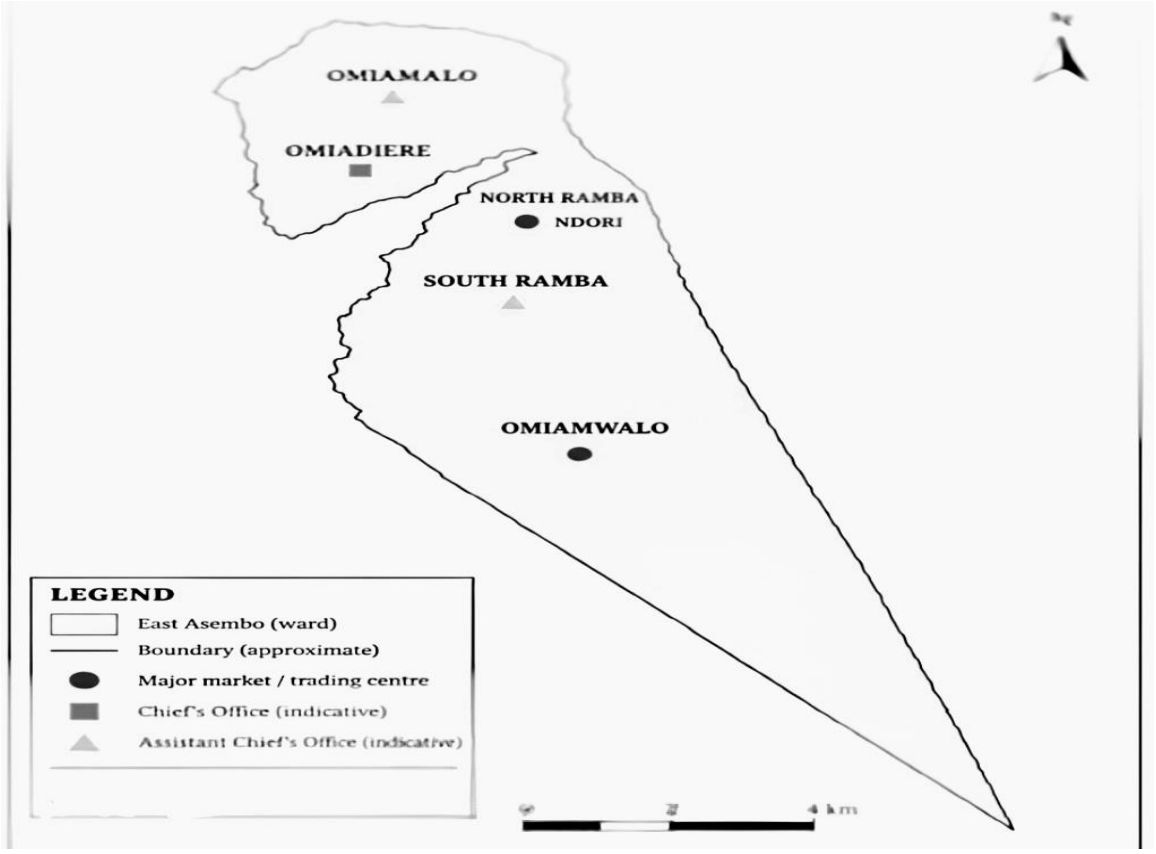
According to Burke (1964) the selection of chiefs in Padhola was shaped by a variety of factors that included religious beliefs, ethnic identities, and clan affiliations which played a crucial role in determining who was deemed suitable for leadership positions within the community. Lonsdale and Berman (1987) support this view by describing the role of chieftainship as a mechanism of exploitation, a facilitator of colonial policies, and a mediator between the colonial authorities and the local people. These colonial actions led to increased

segregation within society, which both deepened divisions among different ethnic groups and weakened the existing political and economic unity that had characterized African societies prior to colonization.

Richards (1960) observes that pastoralists communities along Lake Victoria had established well-defined administrative structures within their chiefdoms. These local leaders effectively functioned as governing bodies, managing day-to-day affairs and addressing the needs of their communities. However, it is important to note that the ultimate authority rested with the *ruoth,* who, supported by a council of elders, retained the power to make significant decisions that affected the entire chiefdom. Colonialism brought tension between the appointed chiefs and the local population. Dore (2001) author argues that these conflicts had practical implications for the effectiveness of resource management strategies in Zimbabwe.

Ndege (2009) notes that in the pre-colonial period, Kenya was characterized by a decentralized social structure, where communities operated independently and were defined by flexible ethnic boundaries. The interactions among the diverse ethnic groups were marked by a dynamic exchange of goods and cultural practices, facilitated through trade, intermarriage, and occasional conflicts. This agrees with Onserio (2021) that despite the evolution of the pre-capitalist economic structure over time, traditional elders continue to maintain a substantial degree of ideological influence. This situation necessitated a study on colonialism and the transformation of indigenous leadership among the Jo-Asembo in east Asembo, Rarieda sub-county, Siaya county, Kenya from 1898 to 1963

Figure 1: ***Map of East Asembo.***



Source: Self

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in East Asembo, Rarieda sub-county in Siaya county, Kenya. The area was chosen because no related research had been conducted in the sub-county despite the making of African chieftainship among the JO-Asembo by the British colonial government. This study utilised purposive sampling with snowballing method in selecting the respondent. A sample size of 30 respondents was interviewed and these included: local administrators, members of the Luo council of elders, religious leaders and Luo historians guided by Kathuri & Pals (1993).

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue X October 2026

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive research design. Kothari (1985) notes that descriptive research is concerned with describing, recording, analysing, reporting and presenting the features of particular conditions as they are. Kathuri and Pals (1993) adds that the systematic and scientific nature of the descriptive research design brings valid and reliable outcomes. For Kombo and Tromp (2006) the major purpose of descriptive research is the description of the state of affair as it exists and it allows for both qualitative and quantitative research. Descriptive research design was used in this study as it enabled the researcher to collect, describe, record, analyse, report and account for the making of African chiefs among the Jo-Asembo in East Asembo in Siaya County, Kenya from 1898 to 1963. This study described, recorded, analysed, reported and presented the findings as they existed without manipulating any variables.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed by the use of Qualitative Data Analysis. Qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions were qualitatively analysed based on content analysis. This was influenced by the data obtained from primary sources, archival sources and secondary sources which were corroborated to meet the reliability and validity of the study.

The researcher presented an introduction letter to the respondent and with the consent of the respondent, the interview was conducted. Researcher obtained a recommendation letter from the Post-Graduate and International Studies at Chuka University which was used to obtain a research permit from the National Council for Science, Technology, and Innovations (NACOSTI). The researcher booked appointments with the respondent to conduct the interview prior to the interview. The purpose of the interview was explained to the respondents who participated in the interviews wilfully and where the respondent sought to remain anonymous, the researcher respected the will of the respondent guided by Israel & Hay (2006).

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

4.1 Introduction

This section provides a comprehensive and detailed historical account for the making of colonial African chiefs among the Jo-Asembo in Central Kavirondo, Kenya from 1898 to 1963. During the colonial period, the institution of chieftaincy was not a static entity nor a natural occurrence that simply evolved; rather, it emerged as a deliberate construct arranged by the colonial government. This construct was designed with the primary aim of exerting political control over East Asembo location., Jo-Asembo previously functioned under decentralized governance systems before the establishment of colonial.

4.2 The making of colonial African chiefs among the people of Asembo in central Kavirondo, Kenya from 1898 to 1963

According to Okaka (O.I, 2026), the arrival of British colonial rule introduced a new administrative framework centred on chieftaincy, taxation, forced labour, cash-crop agriculture, and local Native Tribunals which altered the indigenous political landscape, leading to the emergence of new elites, shifts in authority relations, and the rise of new forms of social conflict. This means that imposition of colonial structures not only disrupted traditional governance but also created tensions in East Asembo.

The strategic location of Asembo prompted the British government to invade and colonize the local population. Most importantly, Lake Victoria functioned as a vital inland waterway, facilitating not only transport and communication but also regional trade. It linked various communities and acted as a key entry point into the expansive Great Lakes area (Odongo, O.I, 2026). Consequently, by establishing effective governance over the Asembo people and the broader Central Kavirondo region, the British were able to significantly expand their administrative presence.

Onyango (O.I, 2026), who contended that Jo-Asembo were incorporated into the colonial framework leading to the formalization of colonial administrative systems, implementation of taxation policies, and modification of indigenous political over the area. Therefore, it can be interpreted that British interests in Asembo mirrored broader trends observed across Kenya, where strategic positioning, economic prospects, and political consolidation converged to propel colonial expansion and facilitate the creation of new social and administrative systems that served the interests of the British colonial regime.

Ojwan'g (O.I, 2026) highlighted that *Jo-Asembo,* responded to the onset of British colonialism with a complex interplay of both resistance and collaboration. When the British first established their dominance in Central Kavirondo at the dawn of the twentieth century, the Asembo people, much like many other Luo communities in the region, initially approached the new colonial authorities with a sense of suspicion and wariness, however, being influenced by Jo-Gem, the people of Asembo chose to collaborated exhibiting mixed reaction to colonial invasion of East Asembo.

As the colonial authority became increasingly entrenched and solidified its power, certain influential elders and clan leaders began to seek out various ways to either accommodate or strategically engage with the new regime that was taking shape around them. This included selective cooperation with District Commissioners (DCs), active participation in colonial courts, or the acceptance of appointed leadership positions that offered both material benefits and political advantages authority (Akoth & Oginga, O.I, 2026). Over time, these dynamics of resistance and negotiated collaboration shaped the development of local governance structures and laid the foundation for the British establishment of artificial chiefships in Asembo.

An archival annual report from 1910 provides valuable insights into this situation, indicating that the District Commissioners, who were stationed in Kisumu and later expressed their frustrations regarding the challenges they faced in governing the Asembo community. This difficulty was largely attributed to the conspicuous lack of a singular leader who could effectively garner the collective loyalty of the Jo-Asembo or serve as a reliable intermediary between the colonial government and the local population (KNA/PC/NZA/2/3). This observation aligns with Berman's (1990) assertion that these governance issues arose from a fundamental misinterpretation of Luo political culture, compounded by the stringent expectations of British officials.

According to archival source KNA/DC/CN/1/5/2, the establishment of chiefs in East Asembo was not a mere continuation of traditional leadership but rather a deliberate colonial invention which was driven by the pressing need to enforce order, streamline governance processes, and reshape indigenous authority structures in a manner that would meet the standards and expectations of the imperial powers. This whole process altered the relationship between the colonial government and the local populace, creating a new hierarchy that prioritized colonial interests over traditional practices.

As per the archival document, Central Nyanza District Annual Report 1912 (KNA/DC/CN/1/2/10), by the year 1910, the British colonial administration had successfully implemented a structured administrative system across Central Kavirondo. The newly established administrative hierarchy was composed of District Commissioners (DCs), District Officers (D.Os), chiefs, assistant chiefs, and headmen, all of whom formed the backbone of the indirect rule system. These observations were corroborated by Ogot (1967) and Berman (1990) that colonial officials actively identified and elevated figures such as Chief Odindo and Chief Owuor of East Asembo. This structure ensured the direct influence of British power over local social structures, effectively reshaping the political landscape of the area.

Mamdani (1996) illustrates that the creation of this new leadership structure was formally instituted through the Native Authority Ordinance (NAO) of 1912 and the native tribunals. NAO altered the governance landscape for African communities. It gave colonial appointed African chiefs increased administrative and judicial duties increasing their roles within the colonial administrative structure. Under this legislation, chiefs, including early Asembo appointees like Chief Odindo and Chief Ismail Owuor , were tasked with a variety of responsibilities. These responsibilities included enforcing tax collection, mobilizing labour, ensuring sanitation to promote public health, and implementing agricultural reforms aimed at improving food security and productivity.

Okoth (O.I, 2026) explained that colonial-appointed African chiefs, such as Chief Daniel Odindo and Chief Ismail Owuor, emerged as significant and influential figures within the colonial judicial unit. These chiefs

wielded a level of power and authority that greatly exceeded that of traditional elders. This shift in power was a deliberate outcome of the colonial administration's strategies. Therefore, the rise of colonial chiefs in East Asembo can be understood as both a consequence of and a mechanism for the British administrative restructuring within the study period.

During the war periods, the chiefs managed compulsory labour for both World Wars I and II, government-operated plantations, and even personal endeavours of the chiefs that received approval from colonial authorities through the DC. Chiefs who complied with labour recruitment were rewarded with salaries, gifts, and exclusive privileges, which helped cultivate a loyal comprador elite, consistent with Marxist views on the evolution of colonial class structures (Rodney, 1972).

In the context of colonial East Asembo, the emergence and consolidation of power among African chiefs were

shaped by a complex interplay of various social, political, and economic factors. Many of these chiefs, hailed from lineages that had previously held significant leadership positions or enjoyed social importance within their communities. This historical context greatly enhanced their legitimacy and acceptance among local populations. Chiefs were expected to embody moral authority, mediate disputes effectively, and foster a sense of unity both within their own lineages and between different groups.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the contingent, negotiated, and hybrid nature of colonial authority, demonstrating that the evolution of African chieftainship in East Asembo was influenced by the interplay between personal leadership and structural power, leaving a significant legacy on governance and socio-politcal organization among the people of Asembo in Central Kavirondo.

REFERENCES

1. Aundrey, R (1960). *East African Chiefs: A Study of Political Development in Some Uganda and Tanganyika Tribes.* Faber and Faber Press.
2. Berman, B. (1990). *Control and crisis in colonial Kenya: The dialectic of domination*. James Currey.
3. Burke, F. (1964). *Local Government and Politics in Uganda.* HSRC Press.
4. Dore, D. (2001). Transforming Traditional Institutions for Sustainable Natural Resource Management: History, Narratives and Evidence from Zimbabwe's Communal Areas. *African Studies Quarterly.* https://journals.flvc.org/ASQ
5. Israel, M. & Hay, I. (2006). "Research Ethics for Social Scientists." London: Sage Publication.
6. Kathuri and Pals (1993). "An Introduction to Educational Research." Njoro Egerton University.
7. Kombo, D.K. and Tromp, L.A. (2006). "Proposal and Thesis Writing: An Introduction." Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa.
8. Kothari, C. (1985). "Research Methodology, Methods, and Techniques." New Delhi: Eastern Limited.
9. Lonsdale, J., & Berman, B. (1987). *The Colonial State in Kenya, 1895-1914.* Cambridge University Press
10. Lugard, F. (1922). *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa.* William Blackwood,
11. Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton University Press.
12. Ndege, O. (2009). Colonialism and its Legacies in Kenya. *Lecture delivered during Fulbright – Hays Group project abroad program: July 5th to August 6th 2009 at the Moi University Main Campus. Accessed Online. https://www.studocu.com/en-za/document/*
13. Ogot, B. A. (1967). *History of the southern Luo: Migration and settlement, 1500–1900*. East African Publishing House.
14. Onserio, W. (2021). *Continuity and Change of Kuria System of Social Control, Leadership and Governance, 1885-1995.* Unpublished M.A Thesis: Mount Kenya University
15. Richards, I. (1960). *East African Chiefs: A Study of Political Development in Some Uganda and Tanganyika Tribes.* Macmillan Education Ltd.
16. Rodney, W. (1972). *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*. Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications.