

The Nandi Resistance to Colonial Rule in Kenya A Focus on the Land Factor

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ABSTRACT

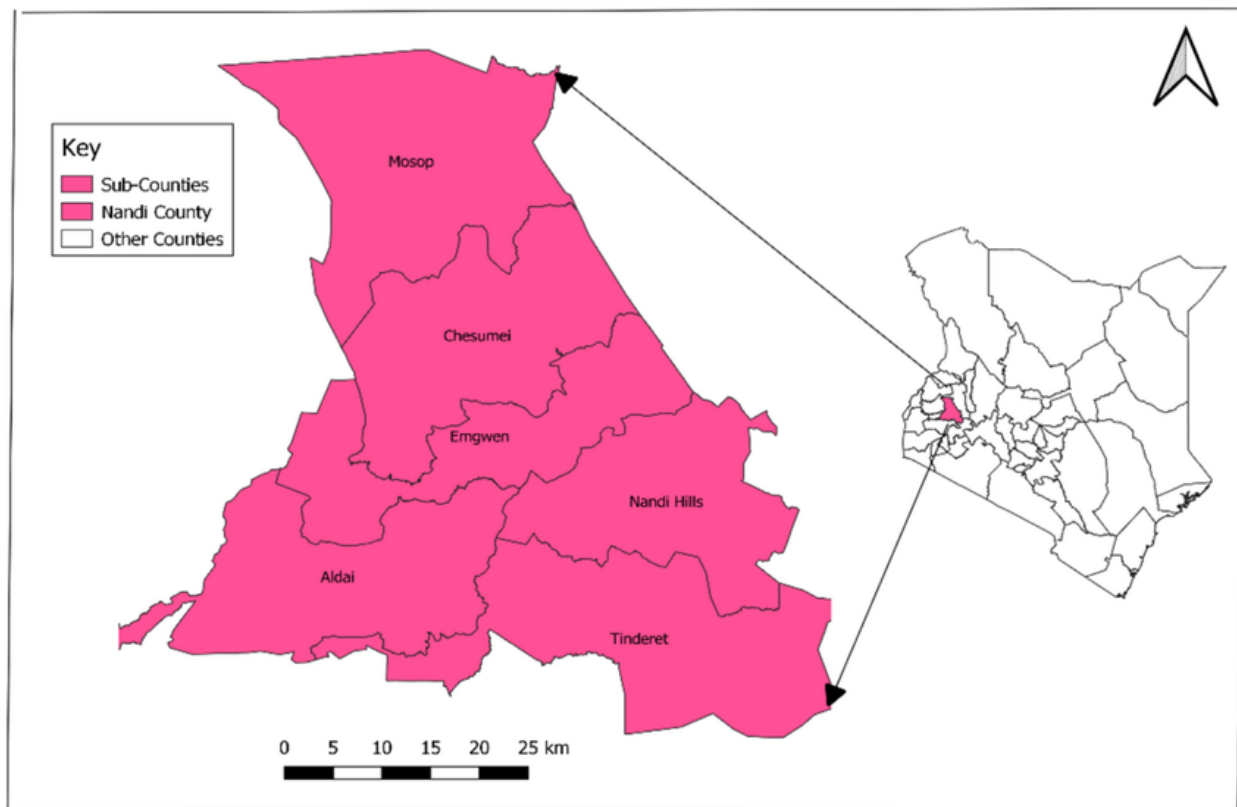
The British government established the East African Protectorate in 1895, marking the beginning of formal British administration in Kenya. The administration alienated land in Kenya primarily to establish a white settler economy, secure resources for the British Empire, and finance the Uganda Railway through agricultural exports. By declaring native land "Crown Land" via ordinances starting in 1897, they forced indigenous people onto reserves, turning them into cheap labor for settler farms ([The Museum of British Colonialism](#)). Prime, fertile lands were seized for cash crops like coffee and tea, creating a lucrative export economy for Britain. Highlands to the west of Rift Valley were among lands that were alienated by Colonial Government. The main native occupants of the highlands to the west of Rift Valley were the Nandi Community who had settled in the region for centuries. The alienation of fertile land in the west of Rift Valley was totally unacceptable to the natives and led to the Nandi resistance to British colonialism which took place between **1890 and 1906**. Led by the Orkoiyot Koitalel Arap Samoei, the resistance was driven by the desire to protect land, opposition to the construction of the railway line through their land and a high spirit of nationalism. The current study sort to understand the specific factors associated with the aspect of land protection in the Nandi resistance to land alienation. After intensive documentary analysis and consultation with elders from the Nandi Community, it became evident that there were a number of socio-economic and socio-cultural factors behind the resistance. Key among them include livelihood, health, rituals and ancestral factors. This document attempts to shed light on six of land related factors behind Nandi resistance to colonialism in Kenya.

Keywords: Land alienation, Nandi resistance, socio-economic and socio-cultural factors

INTRODUCTION

A summary of narrations from elders of Nandi community and documentary analysis indicates that before colonial era, the Nandi community settled in the highlands of the Great Rift Valley in Western Kenya. Their traditional territory centered on the present-day Nandi County, expanding over time into the Uasin-Gishu Plateau. The early immigrants (reported to be from Mt. Elgon Region) were **Kipoiis Clan** led by a man named Kakipoch and who settled in the area of Aldai (Southwestern Nandi) between 17th and 18th Century. Later on they were joined by Talai Clan, Kipkenda Clan, Mooi Clan, Toiyoi Clan and Kabiegen Clan among others. Among the early established geographical settlements included **Soiin/Pelkut (Southern Nandi)**, **Chesumei, Emgwen, and Mosop**. The region consisted of high-altitude, fertile, and well-watered land, suitable for both cattle keeping and subsistence farming. The community expanded from the 18th century onward from the southern areas toward the north, eventually covering a wide area of the North Rift (Too 1916, Oboler 1997, Zwanenberg, 1971)

Fig.1: Administrative Map of Nandi County



Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/An-administrative-map-of-Nandi-County-fig1-3871854217> [accessed 11 march 2026]

The map indicates geographical areas occupied by the Nandi Community before colonial era and which have become administrative sub units of Nandi County. Studies shows that by the time British explorers arrived in the late 19th century, Nandi territory was considered a closed country, with strong defenses and active resistance against encroaching communities (Salipong 2025)

Why the Nandi community were against land alienation by Colonial Government

Before colonial rule, land among the Nandi community was a sacred, communal resource, primarily used for grazing cattle, sustenance through cultivation, and defining social structures. It represented identity and wealth, with elders allocating land for subsistence. It was vital for maintaining the socioeconomic base of the community. Below are six key factors which made the community resist land alienation by Colonial Government:

Factor #1: SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

- Land formed the basis of social organization which was central to marriage and family life. A man was expected to provide land for his family to settle on.
- Source of livelihood and Wealth -through shifting cultivation and grazing their cattle, which served as a source of food, a measure of wealth and social status.
- Land acted as a defensive boundary for the community against aggression from neighboring communities and later became a factor that prompted strong resistance against colonial land alienation.

- Land allowed for the grazing of large herds, which were essential for paying bride-price (in livestock) during marriage, cementing social alliances.

With the arrival of colonial rule and subsequent land alienation, the community could not accept to abandon the land they knew as their home and source of their livelihood over centuries (Ng'eny 1970)

Factor # 2: HEALTH AND MEDICINE

Before the colonial era in Kenya, the Nandi community relied on a comprehensive, nature-based healthcare system centered on herbal medicine, spiritual rituals, and traditional knowledge was passed down through generations. Medicine was sourced primarily from the local environment—forests, woodlands, and grasslands—and was administered by herbalists (*chepkerichot*), elders, and diviners. (Bii 2004, Matson 1972)

Sources of Medicine

- Medicinal parts of plants (Leaves, Roots, Bark and Sap) constituted the bulky part of the medicine used to treat different ailments and diseases. According to narrations from some of the elders from Nandi Community, there were medicinal plants of many types. Examples of common medicinal plants included the following:
 - **Aloe kedongensis (*Tangaratwet*)**: Leaves and roots used to treat typhoid, skin diseases, malaria, and wounds.
 - **Acanthus pubescens (*Ndakariat*)**: Leaves used to treat respiratory issues like pneumonia, asthma, and chronic cough.
 - **Carissa edulis (*Legetetiot*)**: Roots used to treat epilepsy, arthritis, and malaria.
 - **Rhus natalensis (*Siriat*)**: Roots used to treat abdominal pain, diarrhea, and venereal diseases.
 - **Warburgia ugandensis (*Soget*)**: Bark used to treat fever and respiratory infections.

Herbal knowledge was transmitted through apprenticeship, with the forests acting as the apprenticeship sites. This system of medicine was highly effective for the community's needs, managing common illnesses such as malaria, diarrhea, and respiratory diseases before the introduction of conventional medicine (Matisi 2015, Westerlund 2006)

The Nandi community resisted colonial rule fiercely in an attempt to protect this sources of medicine as such medicines were hardly found in other regions with different climatic conditions. Just like in any society, the health of its citizens was not a matter of debate.

Factor # 3: SHRINES AND CEREMONIES

Before the colonial era, the Nandi community did not have formal, built structures like churches or temples. Instead, their worship was deeply connected to nature, with ceremonies, sacrifices, and prayers performed in specific natural sites, communal shrines, and within the homestead. Their spirituality, centered around the supreme deity **Asis** (the Sun), ancestor veneration and relied on natural landmarks

Major Ceremonial Sites and Places of Worship

(a) Natural Landmarks: Mountains, specific hills, rivers, and large trees were considered holy, inhabited by spirits or ancestors. (Dosaban & Beltran-Salipong, 2025)

Examples of Specific Ceremonial Locations

- **Chepilat Hill (Aldai):** Known as the site of the grave of Kakipoch, a founding father figure of the Nandi. His burial place, marked by an ancient olive tree stump, was a significant spot for early community cohesion and remembrance.
- **Sheu Morobi Cliffs (Kapsimotwo):** Located on the south side of Nandi Hills Town. This was a site where, between October and March, elderly members of the community would perform the *Sheu* ritual, an honorable, voluntary leap to their death to avoid the burdens of extreme old age.
- **Aldai Stone (Samitui Village):** A historically sacred stone in Aldai used by the *Orkoiyot* (such as Kimnyolei arap Turugat) to perform rituals and predict major events.
- **Saget-ap-eito Sites:** The "slaughtering of the bull" ceremony, which took place every 7.5 years to mark the change of age sets, occurred at specific, traditionally designated locations chosen by the elders.
- **Orkoiyot's Shrine (Mausoleum Area):** The area around the traditional, spiritual, and military leader's home, specifically the area near the current Koitalel arap Samoei mausoleum, was considered a focal point for community prayers and decision-making.
- **Cairns (Burial Sites):** While many dead were left for hyenas, specific sites where revered warriors or elders were buried served as commemorative shrines.
- **Kapkoros (Community Shrines):** These were the most significant community-level worship sites. They were usually situated in secluded areas, often marked by sacred groves, trees, or hills, where the Orkoiyot (spiritual leader) or elders would lead ceremonies, offer prayers, and sacrifice animals (usually a white ox or sheep) to pray for rain, fertility, or to mark the planting season.

(b) Sacred Trees and Groves

Before the colonial era, the Nandi community, part of the Kalenjin group, held specific indigenous trees in high regard, treating them as sacred, medicinal, and essential to their spiritual, political, and social life. These trees were considered abodes of spirits, places of worship (connected to their supreme being, Asis), and sites for significant cultural rituals.

Examples of Specific trees considered sacred and served as altars.

The most sacred trees in the Nandi community before the colonial era included:

- **Mogoiywet (Sycamore Fig / *Ficus sycomorus*):** Considered by many to be the most sacred tree, it was often referred to as "the one that is never played with" (Magoi - never play with/deface). It was used as a central gathering place for elders' council meetings, initiating peace treaties, and settling land or cattle disputes.
- **Simotwet (Fig Tree / *Ficus thonningii*):** A highly revered tree, often used interchangeably with or alongside the mogoiywet in sacred rituals.
- The **Kapkoros**, which served as the main center of worship, was often constructed under a Simotwet tree.
- **Emityot / Emitiot (African Olive / *Olea europaea subsp. cuspidata*):** This tree signifies peace and holiness. It was frequently used in traditional blessings, for erecting mabwaita (shrines), and in the Iseet-ab-tuga ceremony to bless cattle and drive away diseases.

- **Setyot (Mimulopsis):** This tree holds profound significance as it marks the shift from one age group to another. Its flowering cycle was used to determine the timing of the Nandi initiation ceremonies.
- **Chepisarwet (Cork Tree):** Signified the strength of Nandi men, and it was a taboo to use this tree as fuel.
- **Sagawaita (Knobwood Tree):** A thorny tree used in cleansing ceremonies, particularly to purify a home after a death.
- **Noogirwet:** A tree associated with traditional ceremonies, particularly the gooito (wedding/visit) ceremony.

The destruction or toppling of these trees was (and still is) considered a grave bad (Langley, 1979, Huntingford, 1953,).

(c) Rivers and Water Sources: Some rivers and some water sources were considered abodes of spirits and ancestors (often referred to as *the living dead*). They were believed to have influence over the moral behavior of the community and hold significant symbolic value in ritual cleansing and social transitions: For example,

(i) If a family was "haunted by repetitive deaths" or a curse, they would perform a ceremony that involved "**crossing a river**". It was considered a ritual cleansing and rebirth and which would prevent further deaths or curses.

- **Symbol of Separation:** This act was rooted in the belief that "death does not cross a river," allowing the family to leave behind misfortune or bad omens by symbolically separating themselves from the previous location.
- **Bororiet Change:** The crossing was part of a broader, elaborate ceremony (sometimes called *raret*) to change *bororiet* (a political/territorial unit) to escape curses (Kebenei 2015, Too 1916)

Key Sacred Rivers and Water Sources

- **River Yala (specifically sections known as Kimondi):** This river flows through the Nandi territory, draining into Lake Victoria, and was significant to the community's riparian life.
- **Subutek (Alkaline Water Sources):** Located in Keben, Nandi County, these mineral-rich water sources emanating from rocks were considered special and possessed healing properties.
- **Ainabng'etuny River:** As one of the six main permanent rivers in Nandi, it was integral to the traditional landscape.
- **Kingwal River:** Known for its associated swamp (King'wal Swamp), this was another key permanent water source.
- **Kipkaren River:** A significant, permanent river in the Nandi region.
- **Kundos River:** A vital water source.
- **Mokong River:** A vital water source.

These rivers were often surrounded by sacred trees (like the *simatwet* or baobab) and were used by the *Orkoiyot* (spiritual leader) and elders for communal prayers.

Therefore the Nandi Community could not, by any means accept to be separated from these natural resource as they believed had influence on their every day live.

ASPECT# 4: RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ANCESTORS

Before the colonial era, the Nandi community maintained a deep, functional, and reverential relationship with their ancestors (*oiik*), viewing them as intermediaries between the living and the supreme deity, Asis (or Cheptalel). This relationship was not merely symbolic but was integral to the daily social and religious life of the Nandi people, influencing health, moral conduct, and communal decisions. The key aspects of this relationship included:

- **Veneration and Reincarnation:** Ancestors were believed to be reincarnated in their descendants. Upon the birth of a child, a "spirit" name related to a particular ancestor was chosen after four days.
- **Appeasement Rituals:** If ancestral spirits were displeased, they were thought to cause illness, poor harvests, or calamities. To remedy this, elders performed sacrifices of animals (specifically white sheep) and made libations of milk, grains, or traditional beer to appease them.
- **Daily Communion:** The Nandi maintained a constant, informal connection with their ancestors, often including them in the daily rhythm of life.
- **Societal Morality:** Ancestors were seen as custodians of societal norms. Breaches of taboo, such as failing to respect elders or breaking cultural laws, were believed to attract ancestral punishment.
- **Ritual Responsibilities:** When parents passed away, specific rituals were performed to ensure they moved into the ancestral realm, ensuring the community remained in touch with the spiritual world (Langley, M. (1979). The *Orkoiyot* (spiritual and military leader) also played a crucial role in interpreting the will of the spiritual world, including ancestors, to guide the community's safety and prosperity.

In respect to the aforementioned, the Nandi Community resisted colonial rule and by extension, land alienation in an effort to maintain their relationships with the ancestral world.

ASPECT #5: MINERAL SITES

Before the colonial era, the Nandi community utilized local mineral resources primarily for iron smelting to make tools and weapons, as well as accessing natural salt licks for livestock. Key mineral-related sites and resources included:

- **Iron Ore and Smelting Sites:** The Nandi, along with neighboring communities, engaged in ironworking. While detailed, localized pre-colonial smelting sites are less documented than those in the Lake Victoria basin, oral histories and regional studies indicate that iron ore was sourced locally to create tools such as hoes (*mokombet*), sickles, and cowbells (*twolio*). Blacksmiths were essential to the community, often using scrap metal or local iron ore to create weapons and agricultural tools (Huntingford 1953).
- **Salt Licks (Naek/Nagorwet):** Natural salt licks were, and remain, vital for livestock in Nandi. **Keben Salt Lick** in the Mogobich area of Lessos is a significant, ancient, naturally occurring alkaline spring. Another notable site is **Kip's Eco-Resort area** or various mineral springs around the Nandi Escarpment, which were used to provide essential minerals to cattle.

These resources were managed through traditional methods, with salt licks in particular being communal resources for pastoral activities. The Nandi community had to resist land alienation in an attempt to protect these valuable resources.

Factor # 6: IDENTITY WITH TOTEMS

Nandi totems, known as *Oreet* or *Tiondo*, are animals, insects, or natural elements representing specific clans (*ortinwek*) and are respected by not being harmed or eaten. Totems are sacred symbols associated with specific clans (**oreet**). These symbols are typically animals, but they can also represent natural phenomena like the sun or rain.

Totems helps to prevent inbreeding among communities (Mbiti 1015)

Common Nandi Clans and Their Totems

- **Kipkenda**: Bee (*Segemiat*)
- **Kiboiis**: Wild dog (*Lelwot*)
- **Mooi**: Crested Crane (*Kong'oony*) – considered the first to be allocated
- **Kipsirgoi**: *Toreet*
- **Kipamui**: Antelope (*Kergeng*)
- **Sogoom**: Eagle (*Chepsirereet*)
- **Talai**: Lion (*Ng'etuny*)
- **Kimosop**: Monkey
- **Kipaa**: Frog
- **Kaptumoiis**: Wild Dog

Key Aspects of Nandi Totems

- **Cultural Significance**: The totem is an emblem defining the larger family unit.
- **Inheritance**: Totems are inherited through the paternal line.
- **Marriage Regulation**: Totems are primarily used to prevent inbreeding. Members of the same *oreet* (clan) are generally forbidden from marrying one another.
- **Taboos**: It is a strict taboo for a clan member to hunt, hurt, or eat their totem animal.
- **Conservation**: The system historically acted as a method of nature conservation, as different groups protected different species.
- **Spiritual Connection**: Totems are viewed as spiritual emblems or "teachers" that link the living to their ancestors and the natural world (Langley 1979).

Since most of these totems were found in the land occupied by the Nandi community and they could not be migrated, the community had no option but to protect the land against any form of alienation.

RECCOMENTATIONS

1. A book be written and published to capture the history of the Nation and Kitaleel as their leader
2. A street in one of our cities be named after koitaleels name
3. The British Government be requested to apologise by building a model library to contain a meseum to hold Nandi nation Artifacts

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