

African Contribution in the Growth and Development of Western Education: A Historical Study of Meru County, Kenya (1920–1963)

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Abstract

The history of Western education in Africa has frequently highlighted the role of missionaries and colonial governments, often neglecting African initiative. This study examines the contribution of Africans to the establishment and growth of Western education in Kenya, with a particular focus on Meru County between 1920 and 1963. Using a qualitative historical approach, data were collected from archival materials, oral interviews, and secondary literature to reconstruct Africans' participation in the development of education. Findings reveal that Africans were key participants in building schools, mobilizing resources, advocating for learning opportunities, and even teaching in early institutions. Beyond physical labour, Africans facilitated curriculum adaptation, encouraged enrolment, and promoted literacy as a tool for both social advancement and resistance to colonial dominance. Case studies from Meru demonstrate how African leaders, evangelists, catechists, and community members collaborated to expand access to education, thereby shaping educational structures that influenced broader national outcomes. The study underscores that Western education in Kenya was not merely imposed but co-produced through African resilience, initiative, and innovation.

Keywords: African initiative in Western Education in Kenya; Western education in Meru County, Kenya; education history in Meru County; Africans contribution to the growth and development of Western education in Meru County

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1. Introduction

The history of Western education in Africa, and particularly in Kenya, is often presented as a missionary-driven activity, overlooking the significant contributions of Africans themselves. Early European missionaries entering Africa in the 19th century assumed that Africans lacked organized systems of learning. They viewed locals as pagans, uncivilized, and uneducated (Sifuna, 1990). However, research shows that African communities possessed coherent, indigenous systems of education that were both practical and adaptive to their environments (Sifuna & Otiende, 1994). Recognizing this misrepresentation is crucial for reframing educational history to highlight Africans as active participants rather than passive recipients of Western education.

Missionary organizations such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS) were instrumental in introducing Western-style schools, particularly in places like Sierra Leone and later Kenya, where Dr. Ludwig Krapf and John Rebman played pioneering roles in the mid-19th century (Ajayi, 1965; Taylor, 1996). Their schools combined religious, industrial, and literacy training, laying the foundation for formal education in Kenya (Bogonko, 1992). The establishment of these schools was not solely a missionary achievement. Africans provided critical labour, resources, and leadership in constructing schools and sustaining education. For instance, in Meru County, the United Methodist Missionaries opened their first school in 1912 with the active participation of local Africans such as Joseph Jara and David M'Ituma, who mobilized community labour and materials (Nthamburi, 1982). Similarly, the Consolata Fathers, supported by African catechists, expanded schooling across Imenti, Igoji, Tigania, and other regions, while local chiefs and community members promoted enrolment and learning (Gituma, 2013).

By the early 20th century, schools such as Chogoria had been established with African assistance, teaching the “3Rs” alongside religious instruction and manual work (Micheni, 1988). These efforts demonstrate that Africans were not mere passive recipients but facilitators and advocates for education. Their participation extended beyond providing labour to include advocacy, adaptation of curricula, and ensuring continuity of schooling. Many Africans embraced literacy not only for religious purposes but also as a tool for social advancement, resistance against colonial domination, and preparation for self-governance.

Despite this reality, much of the studies on Kenyan educational history have emphasized the roles of missionaries and colonial administrators while neglecting African contribution. This creates a gap in understanding the true dynamics of educational growth in the region. In some parts of Meru, Christianity and education were first introduced by African evangelists, yet little has been recorded about their contributions. As such, there is a need to reassess and document Africans’ active involvement in the spread and development of Western education.

The present study focuses on Meru County between 1920 and 1963, a period marked by heightened African demands for improved education and culminating in Kenya’s independence. Its primary objective is to examine the contribution of Africans to the growth of Western education, while also considering the interplay between missionary activity and African initiative. Specifically, it seeks to:

- (i) Assess missionary roles in promoting education in Meru,
- (ii) Document African participation in developing schools, and
- (iii) Evaluate how Western education shaped educational access in Meru and beyond.

This research addresses several key questions:

- What role did missionary societies play in establishing schools in Meru?
- In what ways did Africans contribute to their growth and sustainability? and
- How did Western education influence patterns of access and participation?

By answering these questions, the study aims to broaden the narrative on Kenyan education history.

The significance of this inquiry lies in correcting historical bias. For too long, Africans have been portrayed as passive recipients of Western education, overshadowed by missionary and colonial narratives (Sifuna & Otiende, 1994). Documenting African contributions provides a more balanced understanding of education as a collaborative, negotiated process. Furthermore, the findings are valuable for historians of education, policymakers, and planners seeking to design inclusive education systems rooted in historical realities.

Like all historical studies, this research faces certain limitations. African participation in early educational efforts is difficult to reconstruct due to limited record-keeping, as many Africans did not leave written accounts. To address this, the study supplements existing literature with archival sources and oral testimonies. The geographical focus is confined to Meru County, while the scope spans 1920–1963. This period is significant because it captures African struggles against colonial rule, growing educational aspirations, and the political changes leading to independence.

In conclusion, the study establishes that Africans played an indispensable role in establishing and sustaining Western education and that such education influenced their social, political, and economic advancements. By centring Africans in this historical narrative, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Kenya’s educational past and underscores the importance of indigenous initiative in shaping educational development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 African Indigenous Education

Contrary to the common assumption that the missionaries and colonialists were the initiators of education in the continent, studies highlight that Africa had existing coherent indigenous educational systems before the colonial

era. These systems, while diverse across ethnic groups, shared common objectives and approaches deeply rooted in their environments and cultures. Fafunwa (1974) identifies five goals of indigenous African education: the development of physical skills, character formation, intellectual growth, vocational training, and preparation for participation in family and community affairs. Education also ensured the preservation of cultural heritage.

The curriculum was developmental and experiential, aligning learning activities with stages of growth (Ocitti, 1973; Kelly, 1999). Instruction combined moral training with practical knowledge such as interpreting environmental signs for farming and survival. Nyerere (1967) underscores that African education was job-oriented, emphasizing hands-on activities and practical skills that fostered both intellectual and physical development. Instruction was both formal—through apprenticeship and correction—and informal, utilizing play, oral literature, and storytelling (Ocitti, 1973).

African education was underpinned by the following philosophical principles:

- **Preparationalism** (preparing children for future roles),
- **Communalism** (promoting group cohesion and collective well-being),
- **Functionalism** (ensuring relevance to community life), and
- **Perennialism or conservatism** (emphasizing continuity rather than questioning established norms).

Moreover, the education was holistic, requiring learners to master multiple skills across cultural, social, and economic domains. In short, Africa possessed vibrant systems of knowledge transfer long before the arrival of missionaries, challenging the misconception that formal education was alien to the continent.

2.2 African Contribution to the Establishment of Western Education

Though missionaries are often credited with the introduction of Western education, previous literature highlights the foundational role played by Africans in its establishment and expansion, and shaping Kenya's educational landscape, both in Meru and nationally. Africans were not passive recipients but active participants in shaping educational development. Their involvement ranged from providing material resources, land, and labour, to establishing independent schools and influencing educational policies.

Mukudi (1989), Kamere (1992), and Ombati (1994) affirm that Africans supported educational development by donating land, constructing buildings, and supplying materials. Communities mobilized themselves to clear forests, make bricks, and erect classrooms and churches. This investment demonstrated both appreciation of education and determination to secure opportunities for future generations.

Bogonko (1992) underscores African initiative in *A History of Modern Education in Kenya*, highlighting their resistance to racially segregated curricula and inferior instruction. Similarly, Strayer (1973) shows how Africans shaped debates surrounding missionary schools, influencing colonial educational practices and later campaigning for independent institutions. Beyond infrastructure, Africans served as the first teachers, catechists, and tutors, bridging linguistic and cultural barriers.

In Meru County, Africans were instrumental in establishing schools alongside missionaries. Nthamburi (1982) record that local leaders such as Joseph Jara and David M'Ituma mobilized fifty Africans to clear land, gather construction materials, and build the first school at Kaaga in 1912. Such acts of community mobilization demonstrate the centrality of African initiative in translating missionary ideas into lasting institutions.

Gituma (2013) highlights that African catechists consistently accompanied missionaries, serving as interpreters, teachers, and cultural mediators. Micheni (1988) further observes that African evangelists and tutors, many trained at Tumutumu, played crucial roles in establishing schools in Chuka, Chogoria, and other parts of Meru. Dissatisfaction with missionary curricula also pushed locals to form independent schools, thereby broadening access and reshaping education in the region.

African contributions extended nationwide. Ssekamwa and Lugumba (1973) note that, despite limited financial resources, Africans provided land and labour for school construction. They also organized through LNCs and political associations to campaign for reforms and resist inadequate curricula. Their involvement persisted into the post-war years, ensuring that education aligned more closely with social and economic realities.

2.3 The Independent Schools Movement

A striking demonstration of African participation was the independent schools movement of the 1920s and beyond. Dissatisfied with the narrow curricula in mission schools, African communities began to establish schools outside missionary control. Anderson (1970), in *Struggle for the School*, documents how the Kikuyu spearheaded this movement, illustrating Africans' determination to shape their educational destinies.

Berman (1975) further explains that experiences of forced labour and unequal opportunities strengthened African resolve to demand quality education. Local Native Councils (LNCs) provided organizational support, enabling Africans to raise funds and pressure colonial administrators. Through political associations and the LNCs, they not only established independent schools but also gained control of some elementary institutions. This activism illustrates how Africans resisted missionary dominance and asserted ownership over educational development.

2.4 Synthesis and Gaps in Literature

Although literature acknowledges African participation, it remains fragmented and often overshadowed by narratives emphasizing missionary or colonial contributions. Yet, evidence demonstrates that Africans were pivotal in resource mobilization, curriculum critique, independent school formation, and policy agitation. Their role was central, not peripheral, to the growth of Western education in Kenya.

In Meru County specifically, systematic documentation of African contributions remains sparse. Most studies emphasize missionary achievements while underrepresenting the initiative of local communities (Irvine, 1982; Micheni, 1988; Mwiandi, 1993). Addressing this gap is essential for repositioning Africans as active architects of educational development rather than passive beneficiaries.

3. Methods

This study adopted a structured methodology to investigate African contributions to the development of Western education, with specific reference to Meru County, Kenya. The methodology was guided by the need to reconstruct past events and interpret their influence on educational development. It comprised a historical research design, well-defined sources of data, systematic procedures for data collection and evaluation, qualitative data analysis, and strict ethical standards.

3.1 Research Design

Given the historical nature of the research problem, the study employed the **historical research method**. Historical research reconstructs past events through critical inquiry to provide a clear representation of earlier periods (Cohen & Manion, 1994). This approach allowed for the impartial examination and synthesis of archival records, documents, and oral testimonies to establish truths about African roles in shaping education. The design was particularly appropriate since it enabled the researcher to link historical developments with current educational realities, thereby providing depth to the analysis (Borg & Gall, 1983).

3.2 Study Area and Population

The study focused on Meru County, a region in Kenya with a rich history of African participation in educational development. The target population included individuals and institutions with knowledge of, or direct involvement in, education during the colonial and early postcolonial periods. This included former African teachers, administrators, evangelists, retired educational officers, community leaders, and early school leavers, all of whom were considered repositories of historical knowledge (Singleton, Straits, & Straits, 1993).

3.3 Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary sources were utilized. Primary sources included original government documents, policy papers, mission reports, correspondence, certified circulars, and archival materials housed in the Kenya National Archives (KNA). Such firsthand records were indispensable for reconstructing the historical experiences of Africans in education (Orodho, 2009).

Secondary sources, on the other hand, comprised textbooks, academic journals, dissertations, newspapers, and other scholarly works obtained from university libraries and online databases. These supplemented primary data by offering interpretations of past events and situating the study within existing scholarship (Kombo & Tromp, 2009). While secondary data was valuable, it was used cautiously due to potential distortions and observer bias (Koul, 1984).

3.4 Sampling and Participants

The study employed **purposive sampling**, which allowed the researcher to deliberately select informants with direct knowledge or experience of the events under investigation. Key participants included former colonial-era African teachers, administrators, evangelists, retired education officials, and respected community members. Their inclusion provided firsthand perspectives on African aspirations for education and their role in advancing learning within Meru County.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Historical research relies on evidence left by past events rather than direct observation (Hockett, 1955). Data collection began with visits to local archives, including the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa Archives at Chogoria, the Igoji Teachers Library Archives, and Meru County Education Offices. Archival searches were complemented by oral interviews with purposively selected informants.

Interviews were guided by structured protocols that allowed probing for clarification and depth (Oso & Onen, 2008). The researcher also obtained informed consent from participants and employed audio recordings to ensure accuracy and completeness.

3.6 Research Instruments

The study used document analysis and interview schedules as the main instruments. Document analysis was aligned with the study objectives, enabling the researcher to critically examine policies, reports, and archival materials for relevant evidence. Interviews, in turn, helped capture lived experiences and intangible aspects of African educational contributions that could not be gleaned from documents alone.

3.7 Data Evaluation

To ensure validity and reliability, the data underwent internal and external criticism, the two standard tests of historical evidence (Borg & Gall, 1983). External criticism assessed the authenticity of documents to eliminate forgeries, hoaxes, and distortions. Internal criticism examined the accuracy of the information by evaluating the competence and familiarity of reporters to the events described, as well as cross-checking consistency with other sources (Koul, 1984; Oso & Onen, 2008).

Through this rigorous process, the researcher ensured that only credible evidence was included in the final analysis, thereby safeguarding the integrity of the historical reconstruction.

3.8 Data Analysis and Presentation

Data analysis followed a qualitative approach. The aim was to analyse the relationships between categories of data to identify valuable insights and recommendations. The researcher organised the data systematically; a process that involved thorough reading, editing, and creating categories and themes relevant to African contributions to education. A coding method was developed to help sort out evidence from the raw data, separating and classifying topics accordingly, thus identifying recurring patterns and emerging trends (Kombo & Tromp, 2009).

The findings were synthesized into coherent narratives and presented descriptively in line with the study's objectives. This thematic presentation allowed for the identification of African initiatives, aspirations, and roles in advancing Western education, while also drawing broader implications for the development of education in Kenya.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical compliance was central to the study. The researcher obtained a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) and clearance from the Meru County Education Office. Letters were also sent to respondents to secure informed consent and arrange interviews at mutually convenient times.

Participants were assured of confidentiality, and their information was used solely for academic purposes. These measures adhered to ethical principles of respect, privacy, and integrity (Koul, 1984).

4. Discussion

The history of Western education in Kenya has often been narrated with emphasis on missionaries and colonial administrators, overlooking the significant role played by Africans themselves. Yet Africans were not passive recipients of colonial or missionary education; they were active participants, advocates, financiers, and creators of educational opportunities that laid the foundation for Kenya's modern education system. Their contributions ranged from providing resources and labour to resisting oppressive educational policies, establishing independent schools and pressing for curriculum reforms.

One of the earliest ways Africans contributed was through direct support for mission schools. Communities donated land, provided building materials, and offered labour to establish institutions in their localities (Mwiandi, 1993). Parents paid school fees, contributed food, and sometimes shouldered the burden of sustaining teachers, often under very difficult circumstances. This material and financial commitment demonstrated a clear demand for education as a pathway to both personal advancement and community empowerment. By making sacrifices to sustain schools, Africans made education not just a missionary project but a community endeavour.

Africans also contributed through their pressure for access to higher levels of learning. From the early 20th century, parents and community leaders increasingly voiced dissatisfaction with the limited vocational curriculum offered by colonial authorities. They perceived the education provided as deliberately designed to keep them in inferior positions (Sifuna & Otiende, 1994). Africans therefore petitioned both missionaries and the colonial government for schools that offered more academic and professional training. Their persistent advocacy eventually led to the expansion of intermediate and secondary schools, despite colonial reluctance.

In addition to advocacy, Africans demonstrated initiative through the establishment of independent schools and associations. The most notable was the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association (KISA), founded in the 1920s in response to missionary restrictions and the controversy surrounding female circumcision (Furley & Watson, 1978). These associations mobilized resources locally to build schools free from missionary control, employed African teachers, and developed curricula more aligned with African aspirations. Although the colonial government initially opposed these institutions and denied them financial support, their persistence highlighted Africans' determination to shape their own educational destiny.

The use of political organizations to push for education also illustrates African contributions. Leaders like Jomo Kenyatta emphasized the transformative potential of schooling and urged communities to invest in education. Such political pressure compelled both the colonial government and missionary bodies to make concessions, including opening more schools and broadening access to Africans.

Africans were equally central in shaping the curriculum and cultural aspects of education. While missionaries often sought to impose Western cultural norms, Africans pressed for the inclusion of vernacular languages, African history, and subjects that resonated with their lived realities. Parents and local leaders resisted curricula that solely prepared Africans for menial labour, advocating instead for academic programs that would prepare their children for leadership and professional roles. Over time, this resistance and negotiation influenced gradual curricular reforms.

Another key contribution was through teachers and educators. Africans who gained some level of education often returned to their communities as teachers, catechists, or school organizers. Their familiarity with local cultures and languages made them crucial intermediaries in classroom instruction. More importantly, they embodied the aspirations of their communities by serving as role models for younger generations. African

teachers, though poorly paid and often undervalued, were vital in expanding literacy and sustaining the education system in rural areas.

The importance of African women's contributions must also be acknowledged. Women graduating from the Jeanes School formed clubs like the nationwide Maendeleo ya Wanawake Movement (Women's Progressive Club). Besides offering literacy programs that taught Kiswahili and home management courses (civics, nutrition, hygiene, needlework, and agriculture), the clubs engaged in other activities, including income-generating projects, community service, and cultural events. Some women became teachers, nurses, and social workers, expanding the reach of education to marginalized groups, including girls. Their role was crucial in normalizing female education at a time when patriarchal structures limited opportunities for women. Meru, especially had strong literacy programs under a Methodist missionary who intended to use literacy skills to nurture social leaders and make church members more self-reliant.

Finally, Africans contributed significantly through post-independence educational expansion, which had its roots in earlier initiatives. The Harambee movement, which saw communities pooling resources to build schools and colleges in the 1960s, was not a sudden development but an extension of earlier traditions of self-help in education. The schools embodied continuity with pre-independence community-driven educational projects and reflected Africans' enduring determination to control their educational future (Sifuna, 1990).

Africans were not marginal actors but central drivers in the development of Western education in Kenya. Their roles encompassed material support, political advocacy, curriculum negotiations, independent school movements, teaching, activism, and postcolonial expansion. These contributions reveal that Western education in Kenya was not simply imposed from above but co-created through African initiative and resilience. By situating Africans at the heart of this history, it becomes evident that the growth of Kenya's education system cannot be understood without acknowledging the sacrifices, struggles, and vision of African communities.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that Africans in Meru were not passive recipients of Western education but active agents who shaped, advanced, and indigenized it to meet their social, political, and cultural needs. Without their participation, Western education would not have developed as fast and effectively as it did. Their contributions ranged from establishing independent schools, mobilizing resources, and training teachers to reforming curricula and advocating for inclusivity. Communities often donated land, labour, and funds, highlighting the communal commitment to expanding education beyond missionary control.

The positive response of Christianity in Meru, especially, had a profound impact on the establishment of Western education as the first African converts became key stakeholders, working as catechists, evangelists and teachers. They supported missionary activities by providing additional manpower and facilitating the spread of Western education throughout the region, during the colonial period, particularly between 1920 and 1963.

Africans also agitated for quality education and spearheaded local initiatives, which emphasized academic subjects such as English, arithmetic, and geography, over the limited vocational training provided by missionaries. They opined that the vocational education offered in mission schools was designed to prepare them for low-status jobs (servitude positions) in the colony, and, thus, sought an education that was relevant to their situation as opposed to serving Western interests.

The discriminative nature of the missionary education fanned the emergence of independent schools and churches as Africans rose to combat the injustices. Despite the numerous challenges, (e.g., opposition from missionaries and colonial authorities, shortage of resources to implement programs, etc.), Africans remained resilient in their determination to shape their own educational destiny.

Africans also infused education with political advocacy. Independent schools became platforms for nurturing leadership, raising political consciousness, and resisting colonial domination. Even during the Emergency, when independent schools were burnt-down, Africans sustained learning through clandestine initiatives, underscoring their determination to control the educational process (Mwiandi, 1993). Furthermore, they promoted inclusivity by gradually advocating for girls' education, signalling a shift in cultural values and broadening access.

These findings affirm that Western education in Meru evolved through contestation and negotiation. While colonial authorities and missionaries introduced the structures, Africans redirected the system's trajectory by insisting on relevance, autonomy, and empowerment. In doing so, they not only co-created Western education but also ensured its transformation into a tool for self-reliance, liberation, and national development. The African contribution was thus indispensable: without their initiative, Western education in Kenya would have remained narrow, externally driven, and detached from the aspirations of the people it was meant to serve.

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