

# The Socio-Economic Impact of the African Inland Church in Nandi County 1895-1992

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**DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000206>**

**Received: 02 July 2025; Accepted: 08 July 2025; Published: 04 September 2025**

## ABSTRACT

This study was about the socio-economic impact of the African Inland Church (AIC) in Nandi County, Kenya, from 1895 to 1992, focusing on its contributions to education, healthcare, and agriculture. This study was necessary to be carried out because most of the earlier research had concentrated on the political and administrative aspects of Nandi County. The research objectives included: To examine the role of AIC in the growth of education, to examine the role of AIC in the development and expansion of the healthcare system, and to examine the agricultural initiatives by the AIC in Nandi County, 1895-1992. The study was guided by Transformation theory and Socio-Cultural theory. The research employed a qualitative research design(case study). The sampling method used in this study was non-probability sampling, specifically involving Snowball and purposive sampling. This is because the researcher selected the respondents to participate in the study. The study involved 40 respondents and was conducted over a period of six months. A source of data that was used in this study was: primary sources of data, which included the Kenya national archives and oral information of the respondents, and secondary data, which included published books and journals. The research instruments included an interview guide and an observation guide. The analysis of the data was conducted qualitatively, and the presentation was done descriptively. The research findings included that AIC had established at least 28 schools in Nandi County, with Kapsabet Government African School as a supervisory center. Challenges like teacher shortages and a Eurocentric curriculum, the church's education initiatives expanded literacy and access to formal learning. This study recommends that AICs played a transformative role in advancing education, health, and economic livelihoods in Nandi County, offering valuable insights for future policy interventions and faith-based development models in similarly rooted communities. Ethical approval was obtained, and participants' informed consent, confidentiality, and autonomy were upheld throughout the study. This study recommends future research on the Catholic Church's role in mediating the 2007–2008 post-election violence, particularly in Nandi County, to fill existing gaps on how faith-based institutions contributed to peace-building, conflict resolution, and long-term inter-ethnic cohesion in Kenya.

**Keywords:** Nandi, AIC, Colonial

## INTRODUCTION

The African Inland Church (AIC) played a significant role in the expansion of education in Nandi County from 1895 to 1992. Through the establishment of schools, teacher training programs, and literacy initiatives, AIC contributed to increased access to education and skill development in the community. This chapter examines the church's influence on education by exploring its initiatives, the challenges it faces, and the long-term impact on literacy and economic opportunities in Nandi County.

## Religion

Religion among the Nandi people, both in precolonial and early colonial periods, was deeply integrated into daily life and community practices. J.S. Jensen (2019) defines religion as a complex, human-constructed system of ideas, practices, and institutions used to make sense of existence. He emphasizes that religion should be studied through cognitive, cultural, and social lenses rather than seen as a fixed or supernatural essence.

Chirchir (2018) explains that the Nandi worshipped Asis, the supreme deity associated with the sun and regarded as the giver and sustainer of life. Though symbolized by the sun (Asista), Asis was not the sun itself but a divine force invoked during daily prayers, especially at sunrise and sunset. Major communal events, such as building homes, preparing for war, or facing drought, were marked by religious rituals. "Elders often spat toward the rising sun as a symbolic act of gratitude and blessing, and the Orkoiyot, a spiritual leader from the Talai clan, acted as an intermediary between the people and the divine by performing rituals related to weather and warfare. This demonstrated the integration of spiritual practices into both daily life and communal matters"(John Arap Kirong, 12th November 2024 O.I).

Hollis (1909) notes that the Nandi also acknowledged spirits such as Ilet ne-mie (good thunder) and Ilet ne-ya (bad thunder), though these played a lesser role. Natural features like trees, rivers, and hills were considered sacred and were used as spaces for worship. Sacred sites known as Kapkoros, often marked by ancient trees or hills, hosted communal rituals led by the Orkoiyot, especially before planting seasons, to seek blessings for fertility and harvest (Murgor, 2013).

The absence of formal religious structures did not diminish Nandi spirituality; instead, it reinforced their direct connection to nature and the divine. Rituals were communal, emphasizing unity, moral values, and harmony with the environment. Ancestor veneration and reverence for Asis shaped Nandi cosmology, governance, and social norms. "The Orkoiyot guided decisions on raids, agriculture, and societal practices to ensure they aligned with divine expectations. His leadership influenced governance, social norms, and economic matters, helping to maintain the moral and cultural fabric of the Nandi Community" (Musa Arap Tiony, 13th November 2024, O.I)

## Education

Precolonial Nandi education was an informal but structured system designed to transmit cultural values, skills, and moral standards across generations. As Bagchi et al. (2014) describe, such indigenous education was community-based and integrated into daily life, emphasizing practical learning through observation, participation, and oral traditions. Children were socialized into their roles through storytelling, communal tasks, and initiation rites that reinforced identity and social cohesion.

For boys, education took place primarily in the menjet hut, a key institution where elders trained them in warfare, endurance, and leadership. Hollis (1909) notes that these huts served not only as physical spaces but as symbolic centers of masculine identity. Here, boys received instruction in oral history, social values, and moral discipline through stories, songs, and mentorship. Combat readiness and community protection were emphasized, but equally important were personal responsibility and unity.

A major component of boys' education was livestock management, given the central role of cattle in the Nandi economy and culture. Boys learned herding, basic veterinary care, and trade negotiation, along with the environmental practices necessary to maintain pasture lands. This training fostered responsibility and instilled cultural pride (Hollis, 1909).

Girls' education focused on domestic skills, emotional intelligence, and social roles, taught by mothers and elder women from an early age. Tasks such as cooking, milking, childcare, and firewood collection prepared girls to be effective homemakers. A pivotal stage in the educational journey of Nandi girls was marked by initiation, which involved circumcision followed by a period of seclusion during which they were mentored in marriage readiness, social etiquette, and communal responsibilities. (KNA/NDI/MSS/10/103).

"Girls spent long hours helping their mothers with chores, learning by doing rather than through formal instruction. They were expected to wake early, tend to younger siblings, and take part in tasks such as fetching water or preparing mursik (fermented milk). Older women emphasized respect and obedience, with correction often delivered through storytelling or symbolic warnings that conveyed moral lessons. Girls who demonstrated maturity in handling these responsibilities were praised and considered ready for the initiation process" (Linnet Jekporir, 13th June 2025, O.I). Initiated girls, known as Kipkeloik, were seen as mature and ready for marriage, which was often arranged by parents. These unions were formalized through traditional ceremonies that emphasized womanhood, family duty, and resilience.

Nandi education was a communal affair. Elders mentored youth regardless of kinship, reinforcing social ties and cultural transmission. Oral traditions—proverbs, folktales, and songs—played a central role in teaching societal norms and values. Boys and girls received gender-specific training that complemented each other, ensuring societal balance. While boys were groomed for leadership and protection, girls were taught to manage households and maintain harmony.

Formal education, as Hoppers (2006) defines, is a structured system with standardized curricula and certification aimed at sorting individuals into social roles. In the colonial context of Nandi County, the African Inland Mission (AIM)'s introduction of formal education cannot be separated from the broader project of cultural imperialism. Rooted in Western epistemologies, AIM's curriculum promoted Christian norms and literacy in English, subtly delegitimizing indigenous systems of knowledge and authority. As AIM relocated to Kapsabet in 1919 and expanded its network of schools, it also facilitated the replacement of oral knowledge systems with written, Western narratives (KNA/NDI/BRY/26.6). The training of local teacher-evangelists was not simply a tool for spreading literacy but a mechanism for producing colonial intermediaries—individuals who embodied both Western values and Christian doctrine. While AIC's expansion to 28 schools by 1954 appears as educational progress, it also reflects the silencing of indigenous voices through the imposition of foreign pedagogies.

While AIC and government-run educational systems coexisted, their structures were embedded within colonial hierarchies that privileged Euro-Christian worldviews. Although AIC schools gained local support and foreign missionary funding, the reliance on African converts as teachers served a dual purpose: to localize authority and to ensure conformity to imported religious and social values (Maiyo, 2019). The rise of figures like Samuel Gimnyigei, Reuben Seroney, and Bishop Ezekiel Birech reflects the emergence of African leadership within Christian frameworks, yet their success also indicates the limited pathways available for upward mobility within the colonial context. Teacher training systems, though rigorous, were often more focused on reproducing missionary ideology than fostering critical inquiry or cultural preservation (KNA/NDI/MSS/61/2/159). Resistance from the local community—particularly regarding practices such as female circumcision—reveals the tension between imposed moral norms and indigenous customs. Even as the church integrated incentives like clothing, vocational training, and structured fees by the 1940s, high dropout rates point to ongoing socio-economic barriers and a lingering ambivalence toward education that was perceived, by some, as an instrument of cultural erasure.

## Administration

Christianity was introduced to Nandi by the African Inland Mission (AIM), led by Rev. Stuart Bryson and supported by African converts like Kipchumba. Early efforts focused on evangelism through local languages and mission schools. However, strong resistance emerged, as Christianity was seen as a threat to Nandi traditions.

In 1927, Nandi elders performed a ritual curse (Wangoriet) against key converts, including Jeremiah Kipkoech Birir. Despite fear, the converts stood firm, and over time, some elders, like George Arap Sambai, embraced Christianity (KNA/NDI/GEH/270).

"Colonial officials often supported missionary activities, further weakening traditional religion. Churches were established near former sacred sites, reinforcing Christian dominance. Chiefs and colonial administrators discouraged traditional rituals and promoted Christian practices" (Brian Chirchir, 13th June 2025, O.I) Missionary centers, especially in Kapsabet, also influenced gender dynamics. They provided refuge for girls fleeing female circumcision and early marriages. Many of these girls remained in Christian compounds, eventually marrying fellow converts and establishing Christian families. This development challenged traditional patriarchal structures and redefined women's roles in Nandi society. The church's stance on gender helped elevate the status of women, particularly in mission communities. Christian teachings emphasized monogamy, love in marriage, and education for girls. This cultural shift was particularly significant in dismantling oppressive gender norms" (Peter Seurey, 27th November 2024, O.I). Thus, Christianity spread in Nandi through a mix of missionary work, colonial policy, and local adaptation, gradually reshaping cultural and spiritual life.

## Feminism

Feminism, as Walby (2011) notes, has evolved from overt activism to more institutional forms such as gender mainstreaming. Even when not explicitly named, feminist principles operate through goals like gender equality and social reform.

In Nandi, AIC missionaries challenged traditional gender roles by opposing practices like female circumcision and promoting Christian values. However, their efforts faced resistance, as such rites were deeply embedded in cultural identity. Despite church condemnation, many families continued the practice privately due to fears of social rejection and lack of alternative rites (KNA/NDI/MSS/10/103).

Kapsabet Girls' High School became a turning point in women's empowerment. As the first girls' school in the region, it provided formal education and vocational training, allowing girls to challenge domestic roles and pursue careers in teaching, healthcare, and administration (Kiprop & Chang'ach, 2016). While early curricula focused on domestic science, later programs included science, languages, and agriculture, granting economic independence to many women.

Educated women became influential in transforming cultural practices. They advocated against harmful traditions, including the killing of children born out of wedlock and restrictive marriage customs. Their education enabled them to act as mediators between tradition and modernity, reshaping social norms from within (Kiprop & Chang'ach, 2016).

"AIC's influence contributed significantly to the decline of female circumcision in the Nandi Community. Through consistent teaching against the practice and promoting Christian values that emphasized the dignity and rights of women, the Church challenged long-standing cultural norms. This shift created a more supportive environment for girls to remain in school, as they were no longer subjected to early rites of passage that often led to school dropouts. With greater access to education, many girls were able to complete their studies and pursue career opportunities that had previously been inaccessible. Employment gave them financial independence and a stronger voice within their families and communities. The Church also advocated for marriage based on mutual consent rather than traditional expectations tied to initiation ceremonies. As a result, more girls were empowered to choose the timing and terms of their marriages, reflecting the broader social transformation driven by AIC's teachings" (Leah Jeptoo, 12th November 2024, O.I.).

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how AIC's educational initiatives shaped social and economic changes in Nandi County. AIC schools introduced formal education, shifting the Nandi people's worldview from traditional knowledge to Western literacy and skills. Education empowered individuals to challenge existing norms, leading to increased participation in leadership, employment, and economic activities. Exposure to new ideas prompted the community to reassess cultural beliefs, influencing gender roles and social structures. Furthermore, AIC's education programs created economic opportunities by providing skills that enabled individuals to access formal employment and improve their socio-economic status. The study highlighted that AIC's role in education was not just about literacy but also about transforming mindsets and fostering community development in Nandi County.

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