

# Factors For Disco Matanga's Rise Among the Bukusu People of Bungoma County, Kenya

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*Abstract- Disco Matanga is a modernized funerary practice among the Bukusu people of Bungoma County, Kenya, in which traditional mourning rites are combined with music, dancing, and alcohol, transforming the overnight funeral vigil into a social entertainment event. While the practice has become widespread, the specific factors driving its rise have not been investigated as a primary subject of academic inquiry. This study explored the factors for Disco Matanga's rise among the Bukusu people, guided by Cultural Hybridity Theory. A descriptive research design was adopted, combining quantitative data from 130 questionnaires administered to youth and parents and qualitative data from 17 key informant interviews conducted with national government officials, religious leaders, Disco Matanga organizers, and Bukusu elders drawn from five locations in Bungoma County. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative data through thematic analysis. The study found that Disco Matanga's rise is driven by four interacting factors: social and community bonding, financial gain for organizers, the desire for modern funeral celebrations, and peer influence and trends. The study concludes that no single factor explains the prevalence of the practice; rather, the four factors interact to create a social and cultural environment in which Disco Matanga is simultaneously socially functional, commercially profitable, culturally appealing to youth, and socially coercive. The study recommends that community elders, religious leaders, and local government administrators convene intergenerational forums involving youth to develop agreed community standards addressing these factors directly.*

**Keywords:** *Disco Matanga; Funerary Practices; Cultural Modernity; Bukusu Community*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, funeral practices reflect how societies understand and respond to death, a universal experience with culturally specific expressions. Modernity, through urbanization, industrialization,

and globalization, has transformed traditional funerary customs across the world. In Western societies, funeral homes provide standardized commercial services that have eroded communal mourning rituals (Ariès, 1974; Giddens, 1990).

In sub-Saharan Africa, funeral practices occupy a central role in social and spiritual life, yet urbanization and the spread of Christianity and Islam have altered many traditional rites (Gade, 2009).

In East Africa, the influence of modernity on funeral practices has taken different forms across communities. Among the Baganda of Uganda, church-based ceremonies have replaced some traditional funeral rites (Baryahabwanho, 2007).

In Tanzania, urbanization and religious change have led to the fusion of modern and traditional funeral customs (Msigwa, 2015). The Bukusu community of Bungoma County, Kenya, presents a case study of this transformation.

A practice known as Disco Matanga has emerged, in which music, dancing, and social gatherings are integrated into the funeral ceremony, gaining popularity among younger generations while being criticized by elders for its perceived lack of solemnity (Ochieng, 2013).

Nabirye (2016) observed that Disco Matanga events have become associated with alcohol consumption and the commodification of death, as funerals increasingly function as social entertainment events. Understanding the factors that drive this rise is essential to addressing the moral and cultural tensions the practice generates within the Bukusu community.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Traditional funerary practices among the Bukusu community have been guided by cultural norms emphasizing respect for the deceased, communal mourning, and solidarity with the bereaved family. Disco Matanga has become a prominent and contested feature of Bukusu funeral culture, yet the specific factors driving its rise among the community have not been systematically investigated.

Existing studies on funeral practices in western Kenya tend to treat Disco Matanga as a peripheral phenomenon within broader investigations of health outcomes or youth behaviour, rather than examining directly why the practice has taken hold and spread across generations within the Bukusu community.

The consequences of this gap are significant. Without an empirical understanding of what drives Disco Matanga's rise, community leaders, religious institutions, and local government administrators lack the evidence base needed to design interventions that address the practice at its source rather than its symptoms.

Interventions that ignore the social bonding, commercial, cultural, and peer-related functions the practice serves risk generating resistance rather than cooperation, as families and youth continue to find value in the practice despite moral objections raised against it. This study addresses this gap by investigating the factors that drive Disco Matanga's rise among the Bukusu people of Bungoma County.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Cultural Hybridity Theory, associated principally with the work of Homi K. Bhabha (1994). The theory holds that cultures do not exist in isolation but are constantly in negotiation with one another, producing new hybrid forms that reflect aspects of both the traditional and the modern, the local and the global.

Bhabha argued that the space of cultural encounter, which he termed the third space, is where new cultural identities and practices are produced through processes of translation and negotiation rather than

through the simple imposition of one culture upon another.

In the context of this study, Disco Matanga is understood as a hybrid cultural product that has emerged from the encounter between traditional Bukusu funerary practice and the forces of modernization, urbanization, and global popular culture.

It is neither a rejection of Bukusu tradition nor a straightforward adoption of global entertainment formats, but a new practice that draws on both, negotiating the terms of their coexistence within the funeral space.

Cultural Hybridity Theory enables the researcher to analyse Disco Matanga not as a corruption of authentic tradition but as a cultural response to changing social conditions, providing the analytical lens through which the four factors examined in this study, social bonding, financial gain, modern celebration, and peer influence, are interpreted as expressions of this hybrid negotiation.

## IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 4.1 Social and Community Bonding

Funeral events have historically served as occasions for communities to demonstrate mutual solidarity, reaffirm kinship ties, and provide collective support to the bereaved family (Nabirye, 2016).

Mwalili et al. (2025), in a mathematical modelling study of funeral practices in western Kenya, found that informal overnight funeral gatherings attract significantly higher attendance than formally structured events, and that this mass attendance serves social and emotional functions for the community beyond mourning.

Opiyo, Owenga and Osir (2024) found that youth in western Kenya seek communal spaces that combine social obligation with enjoyment, and that funeral events have increasingly become sites where peer networks are activated and social belonging is affirmed.

Cherotich, Olayo and Odero (2024) observed that cultural ceremonies including funeral events in Kakamega County serve as platforms for social interaction and peer bonding among youth.

Tampah-Naah, Anima and Appiah-Boateng (2024), in a study of youth-centred cultural events in Ghana, found that events combining traditional obligations with modern entertainment generate both social cohesion and moral anxiety among older community members, a tension central to community debates about Disco Matanga in Bungoma County.

#### 4.2 Financial Gain for Organizers

Nabirye (2016) observed that Disco Matanga among the Bukusu has attracted commercial actors including sound system operators, alcohol vendors, and event managers who profit from the practice and have progressively displaced family and clan authority over funeral events.

Mthatiwa (2021), in a study of popular music and ethics in Malawi, found that the insertion of commercial entertainment into culturally sacred spaces generates ethical conflicts that communities find difficult to resolve because the commercial actors become structurally embedded in the practice.

Mwangi (2024) found that cultural ceremonies in Kilifi County have become expensive for families because commercial operators set price expectations that families feel obliged to meet.

Ochieng (2013) documented that the commercialization of Disco Matanga had already begun reshaping the financial obligations associated with Bukusu funerals over a decade ago. Matara and Winga (2021) found that cultural ceremonies in Vihiga County with commercial alcohol provision were associated with higher rates of substance abuse, pointing to the dual harm of commercialization.

#### 4.3 Desire for Modern Funeral Celebrations

Msigwa (2015) documented how urbanization and exposure to global media have transformed traditional funeral rites in Tanzania, introducing celebratory elements that sit alongside or displace indigenous mourning customs.

Meinema (2021), in a study of indigenous religiosity among the Giriama of coastal Kenya, found that youth actively assert cultural identity through hybrid spaces that blend traditional and modern elements. Muyaka, Omuse and Malenya (2023) found that youth in Bungoma and Kirinyaga counties are drawn to informal events that combine communal obligation with entertainment.

Katundano (2020) observed that cultural celebrations in sub-Saharan Africa increasingly incorporate modern entertainment formats because youth regard traditional formats as outdated and socially inadequate.

Baryahabwanho (2007) noted that among the Baganda of Uganda, the incorporation of modern elements into funeral ceremonies was experienced by older community members as a diminishment of cultural authenticity, while younger participants regarded it as a legitimate evolution of tradition.

#### 4.4 Peer Influence and Trends

Opiyo, Owenga and Osir (2024) found that youth in Homa Bay County attend communal events primarily to maintain their standing within peer networks, and that the social cost of non-attendance is a stronger motivator than personal interest in the event.

Cherotich, Olayo and Odero (2024) found that cultural events including funerals in Kakamega County normalize late-night peer gatherings and unmonitored social interaction. Mwangi (2024) observed that families and individuals measure their social standing against each other through the scale of their participation in community events.

Ndugga et al. (2023) found that youth in border communities of eastern Uganda adopted behaviours from peer-led communal spaces without ethical grounding because the social cost of non-participation outweighed the moral discomfort of participation.

Barasa, Nabiswa and Pepela (2023) found that youth in public schools in Bungoma County who lacked integration between school-based values and cultural education were more susceptible to peer pressure at community events.

VI. FINDINGS

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive research design, combining quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative data from interviews to allow triangulation of findings. The study was conducted in five locations in Bungoma County: Bungoma Town, Webuye, Kimilili, Chwele, and Sirisia.

The target population for the questionnaire component, drawn from the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, comprised approximately 586,845 youth aged 15 to 35 years and 261,084 parents aged 36 to 60 years, giving a combined target population of approximately 847,929 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

The sample size of 130 questionnaire respondents, 80 youth and 50 parents, was determined using the 10 per cent rule recommended by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) applied to an accessible population of approximately 1,300 persons drawn from the five study locations.

Stratified sampling was used to ensure representation across youth and parent categories. For the qualitative component, 17 key informant interviews were conducted using purposive and snowball sampling, comprising 4 national government officials, 5 religious leaders, 4 Disco Matanga organizers, and 4 Bukusu elders.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale and a semi-structured interview guide. Reliability was assessed through a pilot study conducted in Kabuchai Sub-County with 13 respondents, returning Cronbach's Alpha values above the 0.7 threshold for the section addressing this objective.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, while qualitative data were analysed thematically.

A total of 130 questionnaires were distributed to youth and parent respondents across the five study locations, of which 102 were returned duly completed, representing a response rate of 78.5 per cent.

Of the respondents, 56.9 per cent (n = 58) were male and 43.1 per cent (n = 44) were female. By role category, 61.8 per cent (n = 63) were youth and 38.2 per cent (n = 39) were parents. By age, 37.3 per cent of respondents fell within the 18 to 24 years bracket, 33.3 per cent within 25 to 34 years, 19.6 per cent within 35 to 44 years, and 9.8 per cent were aged 45 years and above, indicating that the sample was weighted toward younger respondents consistent with the demographic profile of Disco Matanga participants.

The study found that four indicators drive Disco Matanga's rise among the Bukusu people: social and community bonding, financial gain for organizers, desire for modern funeral celebrations, and peer influence and trends. Table 1 presents the aggregate means and standard deviations for each indicator, after which each indicator is examined in detail.

Table 1 Factors for Disco Matanga's Rise among the Bukusu People

Indicator	M	SD
Social and Community Bonding	3.75	1.14
Financial Gain for Organizers	3.62	1.15
Desire for Modern Celebrations	3.77	1.11
Peer Influence and Trends	3.84	1.08

Note. Field Data (2025). Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

6.1 Social and Community Bonding

Social and community bonding recorded an aggregate mean of 3.75 (SD = 1.14), indicating broad agreement among respondents that Disco Matanga serves a genuine communal function. The distribution of responses was right-skewed, with the majority of youth respondents selecting Agree or Strongly Agree,

while parent respondents were more evenly split between agreement and neutrality.

This pattern suggests that the social bonding function of the practice is perceived more strongly by younger respondents than by older ones, even though both categories acknowledge its presence.

Key informant interviews reinforced this finding. Several Bukusu elders interviewed for this study acknowledged that Disco Matanga events draw larger crowds than traditionally structured funerals, and that this increased attendance translates into greater material and emotional support for the bereaved family during a difficult period.

One religious leader interviewed observed that the scale of community turnout at a Disco Matanga event often exceeds what the family would receive at a conventional funeral, suggesting that the entertainment dimension of the practice is not incidental to its social function but instrumental in mobilising it.

Disco Matanga organizers similarly framed their role as facilitating community solidarity rather than displacing it, arguing that the music and gathering simply give people a reason to stay through the night rather than leave after paying respects.

This finding is consistent with Mwalili et al. (2025), who found that informal overnight funeral gatherings in western Kenya attract markedly higher attendance than formally structured events, and with Opiyo, Owenga and Osir (2024), who observed that communal spaces combining obligation with enjoyment activate peer networks more effectively than purely solemn ones.

Read through Cultural Hybridity Theory, the result suggests that the entertainment component of Disco Matanga has not displaced the communal function of the traditional funeral but has been absorbed into it, producing a hybrid form in which social bonding is achieved through, rather than despite, the modern elements elders otherwise object to.

## 6.2 Financial Gain for Organizers

Financial gain for organizers recorded an aggregate mean of 3.62 (SD = 1.15), the lowest of the four indicators though still indicating general agreement.

This relatively lower endorsement, combined with the highest standard deviation among the four indicators, suggests that respondents held more divided views on the extent to which commercial motives drive the practice, compared to the other three factors.

Qualitative data clarified this division. Disco Matanga organizers interviewed for this study did not deny that the practice generates income for sound system operators, alcohol vendors, and event coordinators, but resisted the framing of this income as exploitative, describing it instead as fair payment for a service the community demands.

In contrast, several parent respondents and Bukusu elders described the commercial dimension in starkly different terms, citing specific instances in which bereaved families incurred debt to meet the price expectations set by organizers.

One elder described funeral planning as having shifted from a community obligation to a commercial negotiation, in which the family's grief is treated by some organizers as a fixed cost of doing business.

The divided response pattern mirrors Mthathiwa's (2021) observation that once commercial actors become structurally embedded in a sacred practice, families face social pressure to retain them regardless of cost, while Mwangi (2024) similarly found that commercial operators at cultural ceremonies in Kilifi County set price expectations independent of family means.

The lower mean relative to the other three indicators is itself informative: it indicates that while financial gain is recognised as present, it is regarded by respondents as a consequence of Disco Matanga's popularity rather than its primary cause, a distinction not always made explicit in prior literature treating commercialization as a standalone driver.

### 6.3 Desire for Modern Funeral Celebrations

Desire for modern funeral celebrations recorded an aggregate mean of 3.77 (SD = 1.11), the second-highest of the four indicators. Youth respondents overwhelmingly agreed that Disco Matanga reflects a legitimate desire to honour the deceased in a manner consistent with contemporary cultural expression, while parent respondents were more likely to frame the same desire as a departure from appropriate mourning conduct.

This generational divergence was equally apparent in the interview data. Youth respondents interviewed described Disco Matanga as allowing them to participate in funeral rites without abandoning the music, dress, and social style that define their everyday cultural identity, several explicitly rejecting the suggestion that modern celebration is incompatible with respect for the deceased.

National government officials interviewed offered a more neutral assessment, observing that the desire for modern celebration reflects broader societal change affecting funeral practices across Bungoma County, not a phenomenon unique to or confined within the Bukusu community.

This result aligns with Meinema (2021), who found that youth in coastal Kenya actively assert cultural identity through hybrid spaces blending traditional and modern elements, and with Baryahabwanho (2007), who documented an identical generational split among the Baganda of Uganda over whether modern funeral elements diminish or evolve cultural authenticity.

The strength of this indicator relative to financial gain suggests that, for youth respondents specifically, Disco Matanga is experienced less as participation in a commercial product and more as an assertion of cultural identity, precisely the negotiated third space Bhabha (1994) describes, in which neither the traditional nor the modern form is simply adopted wholesale.

### 6.4 Peer Influence and Trends

Peer influence and trends recorded the highest aggregate mean of the four indicators at 3.84 (SD = 1.08), with the lowest standard deviation, indicating

both the strongest and the most consistent endorsement among respondents. This finding identifies peer influence as the most uniformly recognised driver of Disco Matanga's rise across the sample.

Interview data provided clear explanatory texture for this result. Youth respondents repeatedly described non-attendance at a Disco Matanga event as carrying a real social cost, with several stating directly that failing to attend a peer's family funeral when Disco Matanga is held would be interpreted within their social circle as disrespect, regardless of the respondent's personal view of the practice.

This dynamic was corroborated by religious leaders, who observed that even young people who privately express discomfort with aspects of Disco Matanga continue to attend because the reputational consequences of absence outweigh their individual reservations.

The consistency of this finding, the lowest standard deviation among all four indicators, parallels Opiyo, Owenga and Osir (2024), who found that the social cost of non-attendance at communal events in Homa Bay County outweighs personal interest as a behavioural driver, and Cherotich, Olayo and Odero (2024), who documented the same normalization of peer-led attendance at cultural ceremonies in Kakamega County.

That this indicator scored higher and more consistently than even the desire for modern celebration suggests that Disco Matanga's rise is sustained less by individual cultural preference than by a self-reinforcing social mechanism in which attendance, once established as the norm, becomes compulsory through reputational risk rather than choice, a pattern Barasa, Nabiswa and Pepela (2023) attribute to the absence of an alternative value framework through which youth might evaluate and resist such pressure.

### 6.5 Summary of Findings

Taken together, the four indicators reveal that Disco Matanga's rise among the Bukusu people cannot be reduced to a single explanatory factor. Peer influence and the desire for modern celebration capture the

cultural and social dimensions of the practice's appeal, particularly among youth, while social and community bonding reflects a genuine, if contested, communal function inherited from traditional funerary obligation.

Financial gain for organizers, though the weakest and unevenly endorsed of the four indicators, nonetheless represents a structural driver that sustains the practice independently of its cultural merits, since commercial actors have an economic interest in the continuation and expansion of Disco Matanga regardless of community sentiment.

The interaction of these four factors, two cultural, one social, and one economic, explains both the breadth of Disco Matanga's adoption and the difficulty the Bukusu community faces in addressing it through any single intervention.

Read collectively through Cultural Hybridity Theory, the pattern of findings suggests that Disco Matanga is best understood not as either a corruption of tradition or its straightforward modernization, but as a negotiated hybrid form sustained simultaneously by genuine cultural meaning-making and a self-reinforcing social and economic structure that now operates independently of that meaning.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that Disco Matanga's rise among the Bukusu people of Bungoma County is not attributable to a single cause but to the interaction of four factors: social and community bonding, financial gain for organizers, the desire for modern funeral celebrations, and peer influence and trends.

Peer influence emerged as the most strongly endorsed factor, indicating that social pressure rather than individual preference is the primary mechanism sustaining the practice's continued growth. The commercial entrenchment of organizers means that the practice has acquired a self-sustaining economic structure independent of the cultural debate surrounding it.

Interpreted through Cultural Hybridity Theory, Disco Matanga represents a negotiated cultural form

through which Bukusu youth meet communal funerary obligations while expressing a modern cultural identity, rather than a simple rejection of tradition.

## VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made.

1. Community elders, clan leaders, religious leaders, and local government administrators in Bungoma County should convene intergenerational forums involving youth to develop agreed community standards for acceptable funeral practice, directly addressing the social, commercial, cultural, and peer-related factors identified in this study.
2. Given that peer influence was the most strongly endorsed factor, local administrators and respected community figures should publicly affirm that families who choose smaller or traditionally structured funerals are not thereby failing their deceased relatives, in order to weaken the association between funeral scale and social status that sustains peer-driven attendance.
3. Local government administrators should establish accountability mechanisms for Disco Matanga organizers and commercial vendors to ensure that bereaved families retain authority over the funeral programme and are not subject to undue commercial pressure.

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