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Beyond the classroom: Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School as an agent of social cohesion and pluralism in Western Kenya from 1985 to 2024

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Abstract

Islamic Integrated Schools (IIS) were established in Kenya to address the dual educational needs of Muslim learners by integrating Islamic religious instruction with formal education. However, empirical research on their historical development, curriculum, infrastructure and teacher capacity remains limited. This study examined the development and impact of Islamic Integrated education in Kenya, focusing on Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School. Specifically, it traced the school's historical development, examined the contribution of Islam to its growth, explored the challenges encountered and assessed its impact on the local community. Guided by policy historiography and social development theories, the study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative historical research design. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources, including interviews, archival records, school documents, and records from Mumias Jamia Mosque and the Mumias Muslim Association. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select 15 key informants, comprising school administrators, teachers, students, religious leaders, local chiefs and education officials. Data were subjected to historical criticism and thematic-chronological analysis using NVivo software. The findings established that early Muslim settlement in Mumias provided the religious, social and institutional foundation for the emergence of Islamic Integrated education. As a pioneering Islamic Integrated secondary school in Western Kenya, Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School has contributed beyond academic instruction by promoting religious values, shaping learners' development and influencing the region's social, political and economic transformation. The study highlights the significance of faith-based educational

institutions in advancing holistic education and community development.

Key terms: Social Cohesion, Western Kenya, Integrated Islamic Schools, Impacts, Contributions

1.0 Introduction

After Prophet Muhammad died, Islam spread from Arabia to other parts of the world, including Africa. People shared the religion through teaching, trade, and military conquest. As Muslims moved to new places like Mumias, they built Quranic schools so their children could learn the basic beliefs of Islam. Today, this has turned into Integrated Education, where students in Mumias learn both their religious values and standard school subjects in the same place (Sidwaka et al., 2026).

This change happened because Europeans brought Western education to Kenya in the 1800s. British rulers let Christian missionaries run the schools. The missionaries used education to try to convert students to Christianity. This created a problem for Muslims, who wanted their children to learn standard school subjects without giving up their faith. At first, some Muslims converted just to get a formal education, while sending their kids to Quranic schools on the side. Over time, Muslim communities pushed back and demanded schools that taught both standard subjects and Islamic studies together (Forster & Newton, 2023).

This eventually led to the establishment of Integrated Islamic schools in Muslim dominated centers. At Mumias, one of the schools established was Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School in 1965; though later elevated to an Integrated Islamic school status in 1985. The school, like other similar schools, possess the advantage of offering a double curriculum, of both religious and formal education within the same school simultaneously (Sidwaka et al., 2026). This allows learners from such schools to not only gain knowledge from these schools but also nourish their spiritual sense. Besides this, the Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School has served both its alumni and the community at large positively through social, economic and political lenses. Therefore, this paper discusses the impact of Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School to both the people of Western Kenya and the country at large, guided by the following objectives; to trace the historical development of Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School in Kenya; to examine the contributions of Islamic religion in the development of Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School; to explore the challenges faced in the development of Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School and to assess the impact of the school to the local community.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Despite the establishment of Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School in 1985 to resolve the historical tension between Western formal education and traditional Islamic schooling, there remains a significant knowledge gap regarding its broader socio-cultural contribution as a non-formal agent of peace and integration in Western Kenya. While existing studies on integrated education focus primarily on academic performance and curriculum duality in Muslim-majority areas like the Coastal and North Eastern regions, minimal empirical research examines how such institutions foster social cohesion, interfaith dialogue, and pluralism within predominantly Christian settings. Specifically, there is limited documented historical evidence detailing how Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School navigated religious diversity, promoted peaceful coexistence, and impacted the surrounding community from 1985 to 2024. Without this critical data, the institution's role beyond academic instruction, as a bridge for unity, tolerance, and community development in Western Kenya and the nation at large, remains undocumented and underappreciated. Therefore, this paper discusses the impact of Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School to both the people of Western Kenya and the country at large.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study has applied the Policy Historiography Theory by Trevor Gale (2001). The theory attempts to explain that documentation of historical studies should be done in a historical and systematic manner. Drawing on this heritage, policy historiography asks three broad questions: firstly, what were the 'public issues' and 'private troubles' within a particular policy domain during some previous period, and how were they addressed? Secondly, what are the issues right now? And thirdly, what is the nature of the change from the first to the second period? Critical policy historiography adds to these a further two questions by first asking, what are the complications in these clear accounts of policy? And then, what do these reveal about who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged by these arrangements? (Barasa, 2018; Ndenga, 2022).

When it comes to historical policy issues, Muslim learners in Western Kenya faced a major dilemma of choosing between formal secular education and traditional Islamic religious education. For many years, secular education in Kenya was heavily influenced by Western and Christian missionary frameworks. As a result, Muslim families worried that enrolling their children in formal secular schools would undermine their religious identity and cultural values. This created a dual burden where students had to either forfeit formal schooling or pursue it at the expense of their religious education (Gale, 2001; Sidwaka et al., 2026). To address this challenge, the local Muslim community in Mumias took a proactive approach. Community leaders, local Sheikhs, the Mumias Muslim Association, and the management of Mumias Masjid Jamia Mosque collaborated to establish Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School. By introducing an integrated curriculum, combining national secular subjects with Islamic Religious Education (IRE), they offered a solution that allowed Muslim boys to achieve academic success while maintaining their religious faith (Sidwaka et al., 2026).

In the contemporary era, the challenges facing Islamic integrated education have evolved from basic access to questions of quality, resources, and policy alignment. Today, Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School faces the ongoing task of adapting to national curriculum changes, while retaining its distinct Islamic standards. Furthermore, the institution continues to navigate persistent operational challenges. These include a shortage of teachers formally trained to deliver both secular and integrated Islamic curricula, limited funding for modern physical and digital infrastructure, and changing socio-economic conditions in Western Kenya that affect school administration and parent contributions (Sidwaka et al., 2026).

Therefore, comparing the past to the present reveals a significant shift in the status and perception of Islamic integrated education in Kenya (Isaack, 2018). What began as a localized, community-driven effort to prevent educational marginalization has grown into a recognized model within the national educational landscape. The historical concern over whether Muslim students could safely participate in formal schooling without losing their faith has largely been resolved. Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School successfully demonstrated that academic quality and religious instruction can coexist. Today, the focus has shifted from establishing basic educational access to maintaining educational standards, expanding facilities, and aligning integrated schooling with modern national education policies (Sidwaka et al., 2026).

Therefore, this study has applied Policy Historiography theory to explain in a historical and systematic manner the impacts of Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School as an Integrated Islamic school to the residents of Western Kenya at the overall country at large.

3.0 Methodology

Overall, the study was conducted in the Mumias area of Kakamega County, Kenya, and adopted a qualitative research approach grounded in the interpretivist research paradigm, employing historical research methods for data collection and analysis (Leavy, 2017). Additionally, the study commenced from 1985 as it was the year when Integrated Islamic education was installed in Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School and concludes in 2024, when the last cohort of 8-4-4 secondary school students were admitted to secondary schools. The study relied mostly on primary sources of data and only used secondary sources as addition to the primary sources. Primary sources involved data from oral interviews and archival data from the Kenya National Archives, Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary Schools records, Mumias Jamia Mosque records and Mumias Muslim Association records; which included diaries, letters, photographs and speeches. Secondary sources involved books and other written materials.

For the interviews, the study employed purposive sampling technique, where, fifteen participants that suit the study including former and current elderly community members, sheikhs, imams, alumni, teachers and education officials, were purposively selected and their identification through snowballing method; with the researcher keen on data saturation as opposed to sample size (Leavy, 2017). As a result of this, the study generated two sets of data; archival data and data from oral interviews. To establish the trustworthiness of the data, archival data was subjected to historical techniques of internal and external criticism while audio recordings from interviews were transcribed verbatim. All these verified data were then analyzed qualitatively through the use of N-Vivo software; where similarities and differences were outlined using time periods, eventually assisting in coming up with themes and sub-themes that were presented descriptively as per the study objectives (Burke & Larry, 2014).

4.0 Impact of Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School to Western Kenya, 1985-2024

Based on the study objectives, this paper presents the following findings with regards to the impact of the Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School as an Integrated Islamic school to the local community of Western Kenya.

4.1 Increase in literacy levels

Following the establishment of the school in 1965 as a harambee school, the school has lived to its billing through the development of secondary education in the country. At this particular time, following the recommendations of the Ominde Commission, the country had the 7-4-2-3 system of education (Owino & Oduundo, 2023). Therefore, the school served the role of offering post-primary education for the learners, before they could continue with advanced secondary education (O and A levels) as well as tertiary education in the country and abroad. In fact, initially, boys that completed primary education, pursued their secondary education at St. Peters' Boys High School or travel as far as Kakamega Boys High School for their secondary education. As for girls, Butere Girls High School or even Ngiya Girls High School were the schools of interest while pursuing secondary education (School records, 9/1/2026).

The impact of Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School extends far beyond secondary certification, serving as a vital engine for tertiary transition and social mobility. While the school maintains a modest academic profile compared to some of its regional neighbors, its consistent production of quality grades has enabled a majority of its graduates to pursue higher education. This alumni cycle is most visible within the school's own administrative structure; notably, both the current principal and the sole teacher of IRE and Arabic are alumni, highlighting a culture of institutional give-back and continuity (School records, 9/1/2026).

Recent graduates are also starting successful careers in different fields. For example, Ali, a 2022

graduate, is now studying Business Information Technology at KCA University, showing how well the school prepares students for today's technology-driven job market. These success stories show that the school achieves its goal of raising students who are both strong in their faith and ready for professional careers.

The school's commitment to educating everyone is best shown by its open door policy and willingness to give students a second chance. By welcoming boys of all religious backgrounds and academic levels, Mumias Muslim Boys Secondary School has become a popular choice for students from across the country. A clear example is Collins, an Anglican student from Nakuru, who thought his education was over in 2009 because of his poor primary school marks (School records, 9/1/2026). Even though he was non-Muslim and had low marks, the school accepted him and gave him the support he needed to finish high school. This welcoming attitude is not new; it is a long-standing tradition. Official records from as far back as 1971 show the Kakamega District Commissioner praising the school for helping expand secondary education in Western Kenya (KNA DX/21/11/5).

4.2 Religious transformation

Making the Islamic Integrated Education (IIE) program official in 1985 turned a religious goal into a reality. A major part of this change was building a mosque on the school grounds, which transformed daily life for Muslim students. Having a mosque on campus meant students no longer had to leave for Mumias town to offer their five daily prayers, keeping the school's Islamic identity strong and preventing students from wandering off campus without permission. For students like Ali, the mosque helped protect them from peer pressure and negative influences. He shared that the school's religious environment gave his family peace of mind, knowing his faith would be protected and strengthened during his teenage years (School, records, 9/1/2026).

A key sign of the school's maturity is its respect for different religions and its effort to protect non-Muslim students. Even though daily life revolves around Islamic practices like daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and Arabic classes, the school strictly forbids forcing anyone to convert. As it is outlined in the school rules and regulations, non-Muslim students are encouraged to stay true to their own faiths and are treated as respected guests in the Islamic environment (School records, 9/1/2026; Mumias Muslim Association records, 9/1/2026).

The school's policy on conversion is very detailed. While the school is openly Islamic, student conversions to Islam are rare and handled with complete openness. When a student wants to convert, the school reaches out to their parents first to make sure they agree. This careful process has been so successful that almost no parents have ever canceled their child's decision to become Muslim, showing the strong trust between the school and the families it serves (School records, 9/1/2026).

4.3 Islamic teachers and Islamic professions

The formalization of the IIE program in 1985 did more than nourish the daily faith of learners; it laid the foundation for a professional class of Islamic educators. The school's success is best measured by its alumni who have transitioned from the school mosque to national universities, eventually becoming TSC-certified experts in Islamic pedagogy. A prime example is Teacher Mahsoud (Class of 2010), who progressed to Moi University to major in Bachelor of Education Arts (IRE and Kiswahili).

After graduating in 2015, he was immediately hired by the Teachers Service Commission (TSC). He taught at Kayole South Secondary School, a secular school, until 2020, when he transferred to Mumias Muslim Boys High School. Today, he is the school's only teacher for both Islamic Religious Education (IRE) and Arabic. Teacher Mahsoud's journey is just one example of educators choosing to teach Islamic

studies. He noted other teachers in similar roles, such as Teacher Mahsoud Rode at Machakos High School and Teacher Shaban Hassan at Mumias Muslim Girls High School (School records, 9/1/2026).

The impact of the school's teaching model reaches far beyond regular classrooms into Kenya's informal Islamic schools. In Islamic tradition, the Madrasa is the foundation for learning the faith, which requires trained Imams and Sheikhs to guide students throughout their lives. Graduates of the IIE program are well-prepared for these leadership roles, as the integrated curriculum allows them to gain deep religious knowledge alongside their general academic subjects (Mumias Muslim Association records, 9/1/2026).

Having the school mosque also created a mentorship environment where students learned how to lead religious practices directly from their teachers. Because of this, many graduates now serve as Imams and Sheikhs across the country. For instance, Teacher Mahsoud balances both roles by working as an academic teacher and as the school’s Imam. Other graduates, like Yasin Abdi and Ferej Abdi in Mombasa, and Imam Masood in Bumala, have also built careers as religious teachers and community leaders. Ultimately, the school's training gives students spiritual knowledge that they later use to serve communities across Kenya (School records, 9/1/2026).

The reach of the school’s Integrated model extends beyond the pulpit and the classroom into the Kenyan judicial system. Under the Constitution of Kenya (2010), Kadhis' Courts are mandated to dispense justice in matters of personal status, marriage, divorce, and inheritance for those who profess the Muslim faith. This specialized jurisdiction requires judicial officers, Kadhis, who possess deep expertise in both Sharia Law and the national constitutional framework (Constitution of Kenya, 2010).

Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School has proven to be an important training ground for Kenya's Islamic judicial leaders. Graduates have moved from the school's religious curriculum into prestigious roles in the court system. Notable examples include Kadhi Abdul Hamid, who presides over the Butere courts, and Kadhi Ali Hassan, who has served in the Nairobi Kadhis' courts. Their achievements show that the school's academic and religious training is strong enough to prepare leaders for the complex job of balancing Islamic law with national laws.

4.4 Overseas studies

Over the years, the school produced many different kinds of graduates. Some students had the chance to study abroad, either through their own effort or with financial help from sponsors. For instance, archival records show that during the 1949 East African Muslim Conference, led by Chairman His Eminence Hazrat Maulana Shah Mohamed, members thanked the Pakistani government for offering scholarships to Kenyan Muslim students. Since then, Muslim donors have continued to step in and help students from Muslim schools pursue higher education around the world (KNA HAKI/2/38).

The school’s reach is made even stronger through its partnerships with national and international charity organizations, especially the Masomo Foundation; which is an organization that plays a dual role in both supporting needy students and expanding their post-secondary opportunities (Mumias Muslim Association, 9/1/2026). This partnership helps ease the financial burden of schooling by offering bursaries and fee support to students. Even more importantly, the foundation acts as a bridge to higher education abroad, granting scholarships that allow graduates to study at top universities around the world (School records, 9/1/2026; Mumias Muslim Association, 9/1/2026).

A notable case is that of Abdul (Class of 1997), who received a foundation scholarship to study Software Engineering in Turkey. His trajectory, from a secondary student in Mumias to a global scholar and eventually a professional engineer in Nairobi, demonstrates the high return on investment of these partnerships. This international reach is a recurring theme in the school’s records; alumni such as Kazikh Omar, who pursued Mechanical Engineering in Uganda, and Abdulmalick, who leveraged his exposure in

Qatar to become a prominent entrepreneur in Eastleigh, Nairobi, exemplify the school's role in producing a globally mobile workforce (School records, 9/1/2026)

5.0 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

From the discussion, it is worth notable that the establishment of Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School as an Integrated Islamic School was an important decision to the educational fraternity. Specifically, as an Integrated Islamic School, the school has increased the literally levels of learners in the country by providing cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills to the learners. Additionally, the school has also created avenues for learners to study abroad upon pursuing secondary education from the institution. Moreover, the school has served as a pathway for producing Islamic teachers who understand the basic tenets of Islamic principles. In addition, the school has also nourished the religious lifestyle of the learners through allowing them to participate in the daily congregational prayers.

Based on the contributions and impacts that Mumias Boys Muslim Secondary School has made as an Integrated Islamic School as outlined in the study, the following recommendations are made. Policy makers in Kenya's State Department for Basic Education should fully support Muslim schools that want to introduce Islamic Integrated Education into their learning programs. This support should go beyond funding the construction of necessary campus facilities; it must also include hiring enough qualified teachers and Imams to teach the core principles of the integrated curriculum. Providing this overall backing will help expand Integrated Islamic Education across Kenya because its impacts stretches far beyond just receiving secondary education in class but also to pursuing other interests.

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