

The Modes of Agricultural Practices Embraced by the People of Abogeta Sub County Before the Period 1937–1980

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Abstract

Agricultural activities are very crucial part of a people's economic engagements. This study is about a history on the transition from subsistence to cash crop farming in Abogeta Sub-County in Meru County, Kenya, from 1937-1980. The main economic activity of the people in Abogeta Sub County is farming and keeping livestock. Before 1937 farming practices were mainly for subsistence. Crops grown included millet, sorghum, peas, arrowroots, yams, beans and cowpeas. However many changes have occurred in the agricultural sector by 1937. The purpose of this study was to examine the transition from subsistence to cash crop farming and its effects on food production in Abogeta Sub County of Meru from 1937 to 1980. The study aimed at investigating the modes of agricultural practices embraced by the people of Abogeta Sub County from 1937-1980. The study employed descriptive research design to describe the events as they occurred systematically. The target population was 179608 as per 2019 census. A total of 30 respondents were randomly sampled and interviewed from Abogeta Sub County. The instruments of data collection were interview schedules, focused group discussions and observation schedule. The study revealed that traditionally people from Abogeta Sub County engaged in subsistence farming. The study also noted that the transition had both positive and negative impacts on people of Abogeta. Policy makers in the government may use the study to find solutions to food insecurity in Abogeta Sub County of Meru-County.

Key terms: Cash crop farming, food production, intercropping, livestock keeping, shifting cultivation, subsistence farming.

INTRODUCTION

Development of agriculture is associated with the nutritional, economic and social gains it gives to man like food trade, rituals and clothing. Early man was a hunter and a gatherer. He hunted animals for food and gathered wild fruits and roots. Many factors made man develop agriculture. These included population increase, decrease of wild animals due to overhunting and invention of tools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Mwaniki (2005), agriculture was well organized in Meru, Chuka and Mberere before colonial period. The researcher has given examples of crops like millet, sorghum beans, cowpeas, finger millet,

sweet potatoes and bananas which were grown. Like all the other Mt Kenya Bantu, the Meru were farmers during the pre-colonial period. The Meru grew crops and kept livestock. Crops grown included yams, arrow roots, sorghum, bananas and peas. Later crops like maize and beans were introduced by the early visitors to Kenya like the Portuguese. The people of Abogeta kept livestock including cattle, sheep and goats. Sheep and goats provided meat and were used for rituals and sacrifices. European intervention into Kenya resulted to social economic changes which affected indigenous agriculture beyond recognition. It is against this background that a study on the modes of agricultural practices embraced by the people of Abogeta Sub County in the pre-colonial period was carried out.

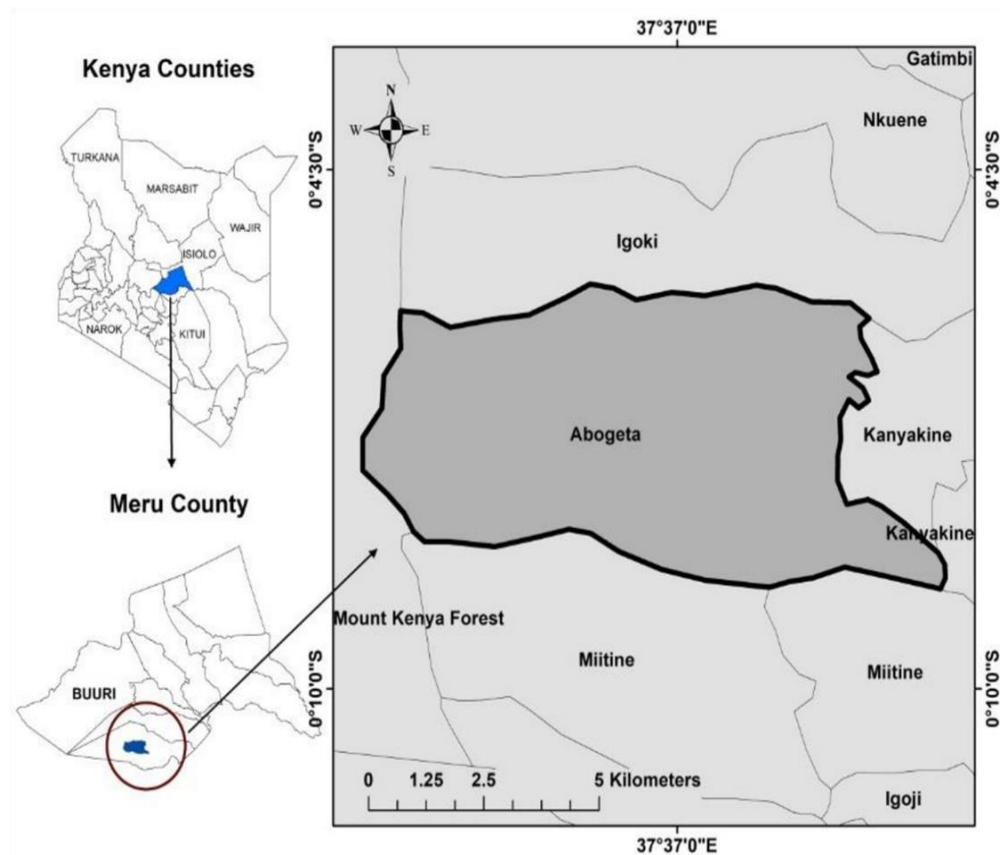


Figure 1: Map of Abogeta Sub County

Source: Meru County Development Plan 2008- 2012

METHODOLOGY

The study employed descriptive research design. Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) notes that descriptive research is a process of collecting data in order to

answer questions concerning the current status of the problem of the subjects in the study and that it determines and reports the study findings as they are. According to Kathuri and Pals (1993), descriptive

research design is a means of ensuring that the process of data collection and presentation is systematic and scientific and the results obtained are valid and reliable. This design was used to investigate the modes of agriculture embraced by the people of Abogeta Sub County during the period 1937-1980. This study described, recorded, analysed, reported and presented the findings of the study as they exist. Thus a descriptive research design suited the study as it enabled the researcher to give valid and reliable findings.

Data Analysis, Procedure and Presentation

Data was analyzed by the use of Qualitative Data Analyses. Qualitative Data Analyses was used to describe the modes of agriculture in Abogeta Sub County, transition from food crop to cash crop farming in Abogeta Sub County between 1937 and 1980 and implications of the changes to food production. This data was merged and transcribed into written texts. Oral data was thematically analysed and corroborated using secondary sources. Finally, data was merged from various data instruments to ensure consistency in data presentation.

Data was collected using interview schedules, Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) and observation schedules. Interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis. In focus discussion groups, a group of six farmers were gathered together to clarify information on agricultural practices before introduction of cash crops. Open and closed-ended questions to obtain information. During the process the researcher took notes and record important points from fourteen farmers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

Imperialism scholars such as wringly (1965) generalise all precapitalist African land tenure system as having been communally owned. According to oral respondent land in Abogeta belonged to the clan. According to Nkoroi (2020). The clan elders had authority to allocate land to different households. Each clan had its own plot of land where people could settle and use to cultivate, graze the animals. Portions of land were set apart for communal activities like circumcision, dances and circumcision rituals. Wells

remained communal lands where all people were free to fetch water and water the animals. It was common for the elders to declare part of land as arable for cultivation while the other was set free for grazing (*buuri*). According to Laughton (1938) the people of Abogeta Sub County of Meru had a well-organized economy during the pre-colonial period. They had a group of professional hunters (Athi) who lived in the forest. Hunters provided meat which supplemented meat from goats and sheep. Hides were used to make clothes and used by old men as mats to prepare tobacco. They cultivated crops like sorghum, millet, yams, bananas and arrowroots. Cattle were kept for milk and were slaughtered for meat during special occasions. After harvesting and threshing food was safely stored in containers commonly called 'muuru.' Only the mother could access the food store. Other members of the family practiced mixed farming. Stored food was used to feed the members of the community during different occasions. Harvesting feast were celebrated where a lot of brews called "marwã" was prepared and a lot of food was cooked to mark the occasion. After harvest the people of Abogeta-Sub-County had festival prepared to thank God for a good harvest. Lot of food and drinks were prepared for the occasion. Basically, the agricultural practices in Abogeta Sub-County were for subsistence purpose. Agricultural activities ensured regular supply of food.

Hunting and Gathering

Hunting and gathering system were practiced in Africa as early as late as the 19th century in Kenya. According to Murithi (2020) the Meru practiced hunting and gathering to supplement the diet. Hunters used bows and poisoned arrows (*ubai*) which killed the animals after shooting with the poisoned arrows. Hunting was done by the young energetic men and boys known as Athi. This was a group of talented men who could use bows and arrows to kill wild animals. The animals hunted included antelopes, deers, rabbits, rhinoceros, warthogs, gazelles and leopards. Leopards were hunted for their skin which were used for ceremonial purpose. Various birds were trapped or killed with sling shot by young boys. These birds included *nkware*, *ncibi*, *ndungu*, *ndwigi*, *ncunguriku* and *majia* Hunting was a group activity which involved two groups because when animals are disturbed from their

habitant the moved in different direction. According to Murithi one group disturbed the animals while the other group waited on the other side. Different methods were used in hunting as some deep pits could be dug where animals could fall when running and hunters could get them for meat He informed me that hunters could also chase the animals towards swampy areas where they got stuck in the mud. Hunters could use fire to chase the animals towards deep holes and swampy areas from where they were trapped.

Dogs were very important during hunting as hunters could use dogs to chase and catch animals during hunting. After hunting the hunters slaughtered the animals and roasted some meat (*Nyama cia wathi*). Fire was made using two sticks which were rubbed against one another to produce fire. After the meat was roasted, not everybody was allowed to eat this meat as it was believed that if you ate sours could develop in their bodies. After eating their share, the hunters carried the rest of the meat home to their families. Women gathered wild fruits and roots *mukuara, maungo, matuti, mpuru* collected insects like termites for food. Women could also move along the river valleys where they picked green edible vegetables *mwenjeu* for food. Women also dig some edible fruits from the ground (*ngatu*) which could be eaten raw by children. This is in line with the findings Abdul Sherriff (1985:4) that hunting and gathering was practiced in Africa as late as the 19th century.

Shifting Cultivation

This mode of production was common in Abogeta. According to Jones (1984), Africa agricultural systems were backward and static. Hopkins (1973) identified several types of shifting cultivation grouped under the rubric of shifting cultivation. He has shown that there existed various types of agricultural systems. In shifting cultivation land was tilled until its yields began to decrease. This piece of land was the abandoned into fallow to the slow regenerative agencies of nature and new fields were taken out of the surrounding waist.

According to Donesio (2020) the people of Abogeta practiced shifting cultivation. He informed the respondents on how he left a portion of his land and

moved with his family to a new area kibari for four years where they settled and cultivated but they later returned back to their original farm. Rotational bush fallow was suitable because the abandoned piece of land regained fertility hence increased food production which helped cope with food shortage and crop failures. This form of cultivation also helped land to regain fertility and check soil erosion.

Intercropping

Intercropping, which Zeleza (1986) calls the heart of African agriculture was common in Abogeta. Sorghum was intercropped with peas and black beans in the same farm. Cover crops like sweet potatoes were intercropped with peas and millet, trees were intercropped with bananas. In Abogeta intercropping was also known as mixed farming. Mutiga (2020) gave information on how he intercropped sorghum with trees. When asked the reason he told the researcher that trees acted as a wind break in the farm and that trees attracted rainfall. When maize was introduced by the Portuguese the people of Abogeta intercropped it with peas in the farm. Wanja (2020) informed the researcher that not all crops were intercropped. He indicated that some crops like millet were grown separately so as to be able to scare birds during crop ripening. Millet was also not grown during the long rains because it matured before dry period and thus could rot before it was harvested.

Intercropping of crops suited the needs of the people of Abogeta because it ensured supply of different food varieties to the people. Root crops like sweet potatoes acted as cover crops and controlled soil erosion, adequate food supply. Food security was ensured through cultivation of different varieties of food crops like arrowroots, yams, bananas, sorghum and black beans Marieta (2020).

Livestock Keeping

Livestock keeping was a very important economic activity among the people of Abogeta during the pre-colonial period. Cattle, sheep, goats. Cattle were kept for milk and were slaughtered for meat on special occasions. One of occasions when cattle were slaughtered was when an age group was about to retire from duty. The young generation slaughtered for the old generation to send them off duty. Mukura

(2020) informed the researcher that milk from cows was important for children and women due to its nutritional value. Milk was also put in special guard's ncengerio where it was fermented and taken as sour milk.

Cows were milked early in the morning after which they were taken to communal grazing fields for grazing by men and boys. There was plenty of land hence open field grazing method was practiced. Animals from different families in the village ntuura were gathered together for grazing were duties were distributed to the men and boys who were to graze for a week then another group could take over Muthuci (2020).

According to Muthuci cattle were a source of power and prestige and the more cattle a man owned the more wealth one was. Animals like cows and goats were used to pay dowry during marriage. A young man had to pay *mwati na ruciu* (he goat and a she goat) in order to get a girl for marriage. Later a *Mwari* (heifer) was to be paid to the family of the girl.

Animals were also important trade items as families with surplus food production could exchange with livestock. The Abogeta could exchange with the Tharaka grains with livestock of sheep, goats or a cow. Animals were also used to pay fines in case of disputes Mwenda (2020). The people of Abogeta kept long horned animals which were resistant to many diseases. Sick animals were treated by herbalists who had acquired knowledge from their fathers. Raiding was way of acquiring livestock where young men raided neighbouring communities to get cows. Raiding involved fighting and it was the duty of young strong men who had to use spears and arrows to attack the enemies.

Crop Production

According to written sources Abogeta people grew different varieties of crops like arrowroots, millet, yams, sorghum, maize, beans, bananas and black beans for subsistence before 1938. Hopkins (1973) identified several types of cultivation under the rubric of shifting cultivation, fallow cultivation and mixed farming. Fallow cultivation helped in retaining soil fertility checking soil erosion to ensure high yields.

Kibaara (2020) a respondent narrated that when the people settled in Abogeta area, they found bushes as they migrated from *Mbwa* their original home. People cleared the bushes and planted crops. Broadcasting of crops was practiced when planting crops like millet.

Some fruits grew naturally like *menyua*, *maungo*, *matuja*. Oral history was in line with Mwaniki (1986) findings regarding indigenous crops of millet, sorghum, peas, were planted. Later maize and beans were introduced by the Arabs and Portuguese. Maize and beans became the most consumed grains by the people of Abogeta. These findings can be compared to the findings of Maranga et al. (1988) history of agricultural practices during the Neolithic period, that is, domestication of plants and animals. He argues that agriculture evolved and developed independently and that only natural forces were at play.

Kiome (2020) noted that Farming methods and practices had remained unchanged by 1937. Plantation and estate farms were not practiced, fertilizers, fungicides and pesticides did not exist. Tractors and combine harvesters had not been invented. These findings are in line with findings of Maranga, et.al (1988) on agricultural practices in Britain before the agrarian revolution. According to him Crops grown included corn, wheat, beans, peas, barley oats and buckwheat. The land was divided into strips depending on the number of peasants. This encouraged soil erosion leading to low yields.

Respondents were also asked to tell whether the foodstuffs they produced were for subsistence or sale. 80% of respondents said their production was mainly for subsistence while 20 per cent was exchanged in barter trade with their neighbouring communities. Families grew foodstuff that were either stored in granaries or exchanged during market days with products not made within their Sub County. Findings from this study agree with those of Mwaniki (2005), which found that the Meru people grew crops like millet, sorghum beans, cowpeas, finger millet, sweet potatoes, and bananas subsistence.

According to Zeleza (1986), crops like millet, sorghum, arrowroots and yams were grown to ensure enough food supply. The agrarian crisis-affected food crop

production in East Africa, leading to food insecurity. According to Were and Wilson (1969, 1972) people of East Africa, 1000-1880 practiced cultivation. They grew crops and kept livestock for subsistence purposes.

KNA/PDA/EMBU/1/32/1963 Sources confirmed that Meru as a potential agricultural area with three different zones where different crops can be grown. The climate is suitable with annual range of

temperatures averaging between 17- 24 and receives rainfall of 1000-2000mm throughout the year.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study concluded that agricultural activities were the main economic activities in Abogeta Sub County. People grew crops like millet, sorghum, arrowroots, yams and kept livestock, cows, goats and sheep. Agricultural activities were mainly for subsistence and not for sale.

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