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THE MODES OF AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES EMBRACED BY THE PEOPLE OF ABOGETA SUB-COUNTY BEFORE 1937.

Kaburu L. G.*[1], Kithinji C. M.[1] and Nkonge D. K.[1]
Chuka University, Department of Humanities Science, P.O. Box 109 – 60400, Chuka.
**lydiagacerikaburu@yahoo.com; cmucece@chuka.ac.ke; dnkonge@chuka.ac.ke*

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ABSTRACT
Agricultural activities are a very crucial part of a people's economic engagements. This study is about the history of the transition from subsistence to cash crop farming in Abogeta Sub-County in Meru County, Kenya, from 1937-1980. The people in Abogeta Sub-County's economic activities were farming and keeping livestock. Farming practices were mainly for subsistence. Crops that were grown included millet, sorghum, peas, arrowroots, yams, beans, and cowpeas. Later Changes occurred in the agricultural sector by 1937. This research aimed 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 investigated modes of agricultural practices embraced by Abogeta Sub-County people from 1937-1980. The study employed a qualitative research design to describe the events as they occurred systematically. The target population was 179608 as per the 2019 census. A total of 30 respondents were randomly sampled and interviewed from Abogeta Sub County. Data collection instruments were interview schedules, focused group discussions, and observation. Study findings revealed that the people from Abogeta Sub County engaged in subsistence farming before 1937. The study established that the transition in agriculture occurred in Abogeta Sub-County due to the introduction of cash crops like coffee and tea. This study also noted that the transition positively and negatively impacted the people. Policymakers in the government may use the study investigations to find solutions to food insecurity in Abogeta Sub-County of Meru County.
Keywords: Agriculture, History, Food security, Farming, Food crops, Cash crops.

INTRODUCTION
The development of agriculture is associated with the nutritional, economic, and social gains it gives to a man. Agricultural products like millet and sorghum are used to provide food. Animals provide meat and milk, and the skin provides clothes and bedding. Early man was a hunter and a gatherer. He hunted animals for food and gathered wild fruits and roots. Factors that led to the development of agriculture included population increase, decreased wild animals due to overhunting, and the invention of tools. According to Mwaniki (2005), agriculture was well organized in Meru, Chuka, and More before the colonial period. The researcher has given examples of crops like millet, sorghum beans, cowpeas, finger millet, sweet potatoes, and bananas. Like all the other Mt Kenya Bantu, the Meru were farmers

during the pre-colonial period. The people grew crops and kept livestock. Crops that are grown include yams, arrow roots, sorghum, bananas, and peas. Later crops like maize and beans were introduced by the early visitors to Kenya, like the Portuguese. European intervention in Kenya resulted in social and economic changes affecting indigenous agriculture beyond recognition. This background led to investigations on the modes of agricultural practices embraced by the people of Abogeta- Sub-County during the pre-colonial period.

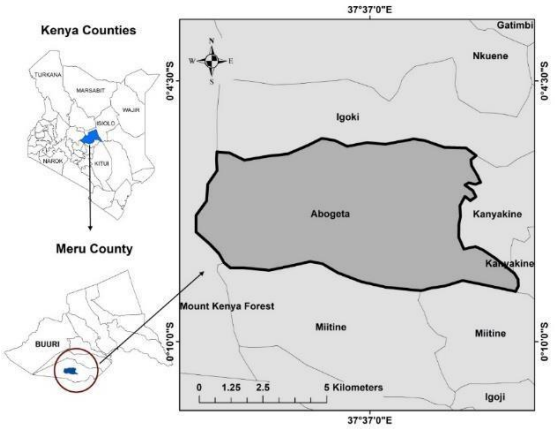

Figure 4: Map of Abogeta Sub County
Source: Meru County Development Plan 2008- 2012

RESEARCH METHOD

The study employed a descriptive research design. Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) note that Descriptive research is a process of collecting data 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 ensures that the data collection and presentation process is systematic 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 1937-1980. The study described, recorded, analysed, reported, and presented the study findings as they exist. Thus, a descriptive research design suited the study as it gave the researcher valid and reliable findings.

Data Analysis, Procedure and Presentation

The use of Qualitative Data Analyses analyzed data. Qualitative Data Analyses was used to describe the modes of agriculture in Abogeta Sub County, the transition from food crop to cash crop farming in Abogeta Sub County between 1937 and 1980and implications of the changes to food production. This data was merged and transcribed into written texts. Oral data was thematically analyzed 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, six farmers gathered together to clarify information on agricultural practices before introducing cash crops. Open and closed-ended questions to obtain information. During the process, the researcher took notes and recorded important points from fourteen farmers.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Imperialism scholars such as wringly (1965) and Ruthenburg (1971) generalize all pre-capitalist African land tenure systems as having been communally owned. According to the oral respondent, land in Abogeta belonged to the clan. According to Nkoroi (O.T 2020), The clan elders had the authority to allocate land to different households. Each clan had its plot of land that people could settle and use to cultivate and graze the animals. Portions of the 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 the land as arable for cultivation while the other was set free for grazing (*buuri*). According to Laughton William (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 that supplemented meat from goats and sheep. Hides were used to make clothes and used by

older adults 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 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 community members on different occasions. Harvesting feast was celebrated where a lot of brews called "marwǎ was prepared and a lot of food was cooked to mark the occasion. After harvesting, the people of Abogeta-Sub-County had the festival prepared to thank God for a good harvest. A lot of food and drinks were prepared for the occasion. The agricultural practices in Abogeta Sub-County were for subsistence purposes. Agricultural activities ensured a regular supply of food.

Hunting and Gathering

In Kenya, the hunting and gathering system was practiced in Africa as early as late as the nineteenth century. According to Murithi (O.1 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 slingshots by young boys. These birds included *nkware, ncibi, ndungu, ndwigi,ncunguriku, and majia* Hunting was a group activity that involved two groups because animals are disturbed from their habitat; they move in different directions. 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, animals could fall when running, and hunters could get them for meat. He informed me 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*). The fire was made using two sticks rubbed against one another to produce fire. After the meat was roasted, not everybody was allowed to eat it 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 were practiced in Africa as late as the 19th century.

Shifting Cultivation

This mode of production was common in Abogeta. According to Jones (1984), African 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 exist various types of agricultural systems. In shifting cultivation, the land was tilled until its yields began to decrease. This piece of land was abandoned into fallow to the slow regenerative agencies of nature, and new fields were taken out of the surrounding waist.

According to Dionesio (2020), the people of Abogeta practiced shifting cultivation. He informed the respondents about 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 later returned to their original farm. Rotational bush fallow was suitable because the abandoned piece of land regained fertility, increasing 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

Zeleza (1986:174) calls intercropping the heart of African agriculture, which was common in Abogeta. Sorghum was intercropped with peas and black beans on 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 the Portuguese introduced maize, the people of Abogeta intercropped it with peas on the farm. Wanja (2020) informed the researcher that not all crops were intercropped. He indicated that some crops like millet were grown separately to be able to scare birds during crop ripening. Millet was also not grown during the long rains because it matured before the dry period and

thus could rot before being harvested.

Intercropping crops suited the needs of the people of Abogeta because it ensured the supply of different food varieties. Root crops like sweet potatoes acted as cover crops and controlled soil erosion and adequate food supply. Food security was ensured by cultivating different 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 the 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 guards 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, where 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 wealthy one was. Animals like cows and goats were used to pay dowry during the marriage. A young man had to pay *mwati na ruciu* (he-goat and a she-goat) to get a girl for marriage. Later, a *Mwari* (heifer) was to be paid to the girl's family.

Animals were also important trade items as families with surplus food production could exchange with livestock. The Abogeta could exchange the Tharaka grains with livestock of sheep, goats, or a cow. Animals were also used to pay fines in disputes (Mwenda, 2020). The people of Abogeta kept long-horned animals that were resistant to many diseases. Sick animals were treated by herbalists who had acquired knowledge from their fathers. Raiding was a way of acquiring livestock where young men raided neighboring 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, the Abogeta people grew varieties of crops like arrowroots, millet, yams, sorghum, maize, beans, bananas, and black beans for subsistence before 1938. Hopins (1973) identified several types of cultivation under shifting, fallow, and mixed farming rubrics. Fallow cultivation helped retain soil fertility by checking soil erosion to ensure high yields.

Kibaara (O.1, 2020), a respondent, narrated that when the people settled in the About 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's (1986) findings regarding planting indigenous crops of millet, sorghum, and peas. 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 Maranga et al.'s (1988) history of agricultural practices during the Neolithic period domestication of plants and animals. He argues that agriculture evolved and developed independently and that only natural forces were at play.

Kiome (O.I,2020) noted that Farming methods and practices had remained unchanged by 1937. Plantation and estate farms were not practiced, and fertilizers, fungicides, and pesticides did not exist. Tractors and combine harvesters had not been invented. These findings are in line with the 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 whether the foodstuffs they produced were for subsistence or sale. 80% of respondents

said their production was mainly for subsistence, while 20% was exchanged in barter trade with their neighboring communities. Families grew foodstuff 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 banana 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 & Wilson (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 is a potential agricultural area with three different zones where different crops can be grown. The climate is suitable with an annual range of temperatures averaging between 17- 24 and receives rainfall of 1000-2000mm throughout the year.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

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

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