

From Pastoralists to Tobacco Peasants: The British American Tobacco (B.A.T) and Socio-ecological Change in Kuria District Kenya, 1969-1999

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Abstract

Tobacco is a cash crop that has been produced in Kenya for the last 40 years. Since its inception by the British-American Tobacco (BAT) multinational, its culture, use, health and economic implications have become issues of social and academic inquiry. Growing concerns have been expressed not only about the health hazards involved in tobacco production but also about the environmental unsustainability of the crop in terms of excessive use of wood. Today, the crop poses a particularly difficult dilemma for development since its production has generated a wide range of employment, income, foreign exchange and other cash contributing effects, while the damage to forest resources and to the environment in general seems to outweigh the benefits. Kenya's declining economy seems to offer few choices to the exchequer, hence the addiction to the tobacco cash, an affliction that has continued to affect the farmer.

Tobacco production in Kenya under the aegis of the British-American Tobacco (B.A.T) company, has created a tobacco peasantry that has long been ignored by social scientists as well as economic historians. Yet, the tobacco farming has had profound implications to both the physical and social environment of the peasants living conditions. While in a wider context a lot of literature on social relations on mechanisms of production does exist, lack of systematic studies on the relationship between people and their physical environment remains a yawning gap in the historiography of Kenya.

And, although many scholars argue that agricultural intensification does not always lead to deforestation or even degradation, tobacco does, however, have certain characteristics which make it perhaps an extreme case, a number of people tend to overlook the reality that it is frequently the overuse of the land and resources often for commercial interests, that is behind the degradation of environments in the local communities.

This study, therefore, is a historical examination of a tobacco growing peasantry in Kuria District of South-west Kenya. The focus of the study is an attempt to understanding the history of men and women for whom tobacco became an important part of their existence as small-scale agricultural contract producers for the B.A.T Company. The study also examines how the B.A.T oligolistic structures transformed a once self-sufficient people with strong cattle oligarchy into the leaf producers for the international market. The emphasis is placed on the environmental change that has occurred in the district in relation to changing modes of production, i.e from agro-pastoralism to tobacco agriculture. By doing so the social dynamics that have operated within these conditions will bring a better understanding of the nature of the problems of Kuria agriculture. Ultimately such an approach is best able to reveal the reasons for the poor economic performance of many African societies in post-colonial era.

"Clearly, priorities have shifted in Kuria-agropastoralism. The hill-side once dense with grazing cattle are now covered with a green-gold patchwork of tobacco fields.... the cows are relatively few...the once mighty cow has lost all economic or social utility. But now it occupies a limited space, both physically and metaphorically in the Kuria culture."¹

I. The Study Area

Kuria district comprises four divisions namely, Kehancha, Mabera, Ntimaru, and Kegonga. The district has a total area of 580 square kilometres and borders Tanzania to the south, Migori to the north and Transmara (Narok) district to the east. Topographically, the area has undulating hills with river valleys that run from the south towards the north interspersed with few stretches of flat areas. The district has an inland modified tropical type of climate. The vegetation of the area has reduced to the secondary level (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources classification) the primary (indigenous) vegetation has been left along some parts of the riverines. The soil type ranges from the red volcanic soils to the south of the district (Ntimaru) loams to the black sandy west and east of the district (Kehancha and Mabera divisions). Initially, the district was traversed by numerous rivers and seasonal streams, which flowed towards the north direction into river Migori. However, the major rivers now found in the District are Hibwa and Tebesi both of which are tributaries of Migori River.² The population of the district as by the 1999 census is 120,000.

II. The Problem

The World Health Organization recently termed tobacco control as the quintessential challenge of sustainable development, since it carries implications for trade and taxation, agricultural subsidies, the environment, social policies, and health care expenditures, among other sectors. Blunting the epidemic, therefore, requires a better understanding of the process and the socio-ecological implications of tobacco production at the farm level.

Kenya's forests are rapidly declining mainly due to pressure from commercial farming. According to a recent report, tobacco agriculture and other land uses constitutes a greater percentage in forest destruction in Kenya. The productive area which forms about 20% of the country's area falls in the medium and high potential agro-ecological zones and is under agriculture, forest and nature reserves. According to FAO Forest Resource Assessment 1990, Kenya is classified among the countries with low forest cover of less than 2% of the total land area. The dwindling forest cover has a severe effect on the climate, wildlife, streams, human population especially forest dwellers as one of the recent reports stated:

"...The slopes on the sides of the Kunati Valley, near Mount Kenya, are now completely bare... their former covering of trees has been cut down to be used as fuel for curing tobacco. Farmers in Kenya's [in this] Valley have stopped growing maize—the country's most important staple food-- and are now growing tobacco for a multinational company"³

¹ S Friedberg, "Changing Values in Kuria Agropastoralism", mimeo, Yale University, 1987, p. 18

² Kuria District Development Plan, 1997-2001,(Nairobi, 1997), p. 5

³ Tobacco Depletes Food-Crop Land," 28 Smoke Signals (3) 7 (1982).

On the other hand and as it is suggested in the report above, tobacco cash cropping and its side effects has caused deterioration in the health and nutritional status of households in the district since the crop substitutes for and or displaces the food crop production and above all increased tobacco growing in these areas conflicts with the national objectives of self-sufficiency in food production as enunciated in *Sessional Paper No. 4 of 1981* on National Food Policy, Republic of Kenya, 1981.

III. The Colonial Legacy and the Transformation of Cattle Sector

In a study of the English working class, E.P Thompson admonished historians to rescue the “casualties of history ...from enormous condensation of posterity.”⁴ His work challenged historians to look at ordinary people in societies around the world who daily laboured to produce wealth from which they rarely benefited. This minor work of a pauperised tobacco peasant in Kenya will probably be an addition to numerous historical studies that have taken up to this challenge.

The inhabitants of Kuria District are the Abakuria who are classified as Bantu speakers though in wider Kenyan context they were not regarded as typical Bantu because of their over reliance on cattle especially in the last century. Bukuria was colonised by the British from 1903 and from the colonial records it seems that the Kuria were imperfectly understood particularly by the colonial administrators and as well as anthropologists. Some anthropologists have described them as: "a cattle people at heart"⁵ with an obsession "beyond cure"⁶ R. Hemsted got struck of their fondness to cattle and reported that "they were indeed extremely rich in cattle"⁷ while, an agricultural officer in the district wrote that, "these natives as a whole are agricultural people with strong proclivities towards pastoral tendencies"⁸ many colonial reports however branded them as "inveterate stock thieves"⁹ and J.P Moffet stigmatized them as "hereditary indented with criminality", he wrote:

They [Kuria] are intelligent but highly temperamental ... they crave for excitement finding life tedious without it, if they cannot alley their restlessness by making war on their neighbours, or stealing cattle, they must find some outlet for their energies¹⁰

And more recently, Kjerland wrote that their cattle obsession was "beyond cure"¹¹ while M.Prazak held that "they have a reputation of being war-like and difficult to administer"¹² Writing so many years ago, Hans Cory, observed that "the Kuria have been treated bad by history made by Europeans."¹³

⁴ E.P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1968), p. 12, Cited in Stephen C.Hubert, *A Most Promising Weed: Farming and Labour History in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890-1945* (Athens, 1998), p.1

⁵ W.H Whitley, "Kuria Cattle Terminology", 1954, p. 5

⁶ Kirsten Alserker Kjerland, *Cattle Breed Shillings Don't: The Belated Incorporation of the Abakuria into Modern Kenya* PhD Disertation, University of Bergen, 1995

⁷ KNA/PC/NZA/1/1/2, Monthly Intelligence Report, South Kavirondo District, 1908

⁸ KNA/PC/NZA/1/8, *ibid*, 1910

⁹ See for example, KNA/DC/KSI/1/4, South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1935

¹⁰ J.P Moffet, *A Handbook of Tanganyika* (Dar es Salaam,1958), p. 16

¹¹ Kirsten Alserker Kjerland, *Cattle Breed Shillings Don't: The Belated Incorporation of the Abakuria into Modern Kenya* PhD Disertation, University of Bergen, 1995

¹² M.Prazak, *Cultural Expression of Socio-Economic Differentiation Among the Kuria of Kenya*, PhD Disertation, Yale University, 1995. P. 335

¹³ Hans Cory, "Kuria Land Tenure", 1945, Rhodes House, Oxford

Therefore, while the British settlers were rushing to get stake of land in Kenya, Kuria District continued to retain peripheral position throughout the colonial period, there were no British administrators or settlers came to live in Kuria. The region was far from Nairobi and the East African railway in addition, the areas, was situated far from the administrative headquarters and lack of roads and proper bridges hindered the penetration of colonial farmers into Bukuria. Likewise, the area had been engulfed in a square of geographical impediments: to the north Migori River crossed over to the lake and therefore prevented prospective farmers from settling in the area; River Migori is a large river and it took over 30 years for the colonial government to construct a permanent bridge that would allow a through road to Bukuria.

To the south was the German East Africa (Tanganyika), the Germans were perennial enemies of the British, and by 1903 the British had established Karungu (a small port town at the shores of Lake Victoria) as a strategic base from which they would establish control over "the area threatened by German encroachment"¹⁴ In the west of Bukuria, were the vast waters of Lake Victoria and although navigable, the British did not by then have sailing vessels to bring themselves to Bukuria and lastly, in the East, there was the large Mara game reserve.

Besides the physical remoteness, the official reputation of the Abakuria as "backward" "unsophisticated" and "litigious" had contributed to a widespread misconception of the area as a place of banishment. Majority of the colonial administrators held that the "Kuria [always] turned deaf ear to agriculture and veterinary exhortations and had been known to chase government officials with spears". However, many of them understood that Kuria soil was rich and in fact many colonial reports had indicated that if not destined to be a haven for white settlers, the Kuria had as much agricultural potential as other places in the African highlands. One administrator reported that he saw finger millet in Kuria, which grew as big like wheat grown in England and that there were numerous healthy Zebu cattle.¹⁵

These factors as we shall see, partly explain why the BAT multinational had to select Kuria District as most suitable region for tobacco farming. Therefore, from the very beginning, the colonial administrators opposed the Kuria apparently "irrational fondness" of their herds they argued that they spent much time discussing, stealing, and guarding so many "unproductive " animals, they saw that Kuria large herds would hurt agricultural yields. Therefore, formulated some policy towards cattle, this they did through directly and indirectly induced changes, the direct induced ones comprised actions like the control of cattle numbers and their movements and marketing. Indirect induced changes were aimed at breaking the hegemonic position of cattle by *inter alia* monetising bride-price, increasing taxation, destocking, and forced cattle sale.¹⁶ In pursuit of this objective, the colonialist sought to promote crop production while undermining the pastoral component of the Kuria economy. Ironically, by making the agriculture more profitable while undermining the pastoral component, the policy enabled the Kuria to acquire more cattle, instead of marketing their stock; for example, they preferred to retain their stock by deriving the necessary cash income from the sale of crops and wage employment.¹⁷

During the inter-war years the colonial authorities occasionally resorted to poisoning their herds with mockery vaccinations. When several animals died and since the vaccines were

¹⁴ KNA/DC/KSI/3/1, History of the District, 1898-1945, p. 20

¹⁵ KNA/DC/KSI/1/1, South Kavirondo District Annual Report, 1906.

¹⁶ KNA/DC/KSI/7/1, Agricultural Reports, 1905-1909

¹⁷ KNA/DC/NZA/3?49/5-6, Cattle Trade, 1923-1927

mandatory, "the Kuria planned to bribe chiefs to let their animals go free from vaccinations".¹⁸ When all other means of reducing herd seizures failed, the colonial government tried more drastic measures by *inter alia* forcing through their chiefs Kuria to annually sell a certain number of their animals population but Kuria resulted into transferring their herds by night to the homes of distant friends in Tanganyika.¹⁹ One man declared in the British court why he was opposed to destocking and other reduction measures:

"Our cattle are our mother, our father, and our children. Would you make me kill my mother because she was old? Would you make me slaughter some of my children because they are many? The answer is no. And neither do I expect you to sell your mother for cash when you want a new blanket or slaughter a son when you have a wedding. Do you castrate your children?"²⁰

And, although the Swynnerton Plan of 1955 had earmarked to "improve" Kuria agriculture with the introduction of cash crops such as coffee and tea, and implementation of land legislation and consolidation -- the promotion of new cash crops sparked no drastic shift to the patterns of colonial agriculture in the district, while neither did the individualization of land tenure under the plan have any significant impact on the cattle sector in Bukuria. Households could graze their herds on any enclosed land and although land resources were shrinking and were therefore not enough to the late 1950s this did not discourage the Kuria from building their herds as big as possible and indeed Ruel remarked that "...their size [had] grown to outnumber human population by the ratio of 2.5 to 1."²¹ And in fact, just before the introduction of tobacco, almost similar figures had been maintained. (See table below):

KURIA DISTRICT LIVESTOCK CENSUS, 1967

LOCATION	CATTLE	SHEEP	GOATS	DONKEYS	CATS	DOGS	FOWLS
BWIREGE	14050	2240	2454	231	610	33	14178
NYABASI	16100	2440	3565	129	721	344	16067
BUKIRA	30175	4790	5120	47	349	349	11606
BUGUMBE	15174	1073	2608	191	237	237	27617
TOTAL	162761	25104	25145	1818	3301	1937	188830

Source: Kehancha, Monthly Reports, 1969

In 1963 after the Kenyan independence, Kuria district was classified as a high potential area by the ministry of Agriculture.²² And by the year 1964 the District had formed a powerful marketing board that sold an annual average of 300,000 bags of Maize²³ from a handful of small-scale farmers compared to 1995 when the production were 20,000 bags of maize. Cattle sold to the Kenya Meat Commission during the 1960s constituted 90% of total sales from Nyanza Province.²⁴ Forest resources in the District were mainly natural forests with about 5 government owned or gazette areas. With gradual intensification of agriculture indigenous trees were to a

¹⁸ KNA/PC/NZA/3/7/2/3, East Africa Boundary, 1929-1935. The idea of redrawing the border was suggested by the Nyanza Provincial administration to contain the unauthorized movement of people and livestock.

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Winnington -Ingram, "Survey of Land Utilization Problems in Northern Mara" North Mara District Annual Reports, 1950

²¹ M.J Ruel, "Kuria Generation Classes" in *Africa* vol. 32, pp.14-36

²² Government of Kenya Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1964

²³ KNA/DC/HB/2/5, Nyanza Provincial Marketing Board Report, 1964-1969

²⁴ The Kenya Farmer, 1969, p. 16

large extent replaced by exotics. The SRDP (Special Rural Development Program) reached a conclusion that the Kuria district had good soils and adequate rainfall but the area had been neglected compared to other potential areas in Kenya.

IV. From Pastoralists to Contract Tobacco farmers

Tobacco has been consumed and/or cultivated in Africa since the end of the 16th century, but it was not until the 19th century that commercial cultivation began. In Kenya there was little production at the beginning of the century-and one could not therefore imagine that sixty years later, this plant “profusely covered with clammy hairs” the so called golden leaf and -“whose its supposed virtues secured for it great renown, sages wrote in its favour, poets sang its praise, novelists eulogised it and divines embodied it in the discourses”²⁵-would produce lands of blasted desolation, causing wretchedness among the people once rich and dignified pastoralists.

So that in fact, the history of tobacco production in Kenya can be traced back from the year 1935, when a native tobacco industry was being started by settlers in Nyanza province for making cigarettes. In 1954, due to the Swynnerton Plan of improved agriculture in Kenya and in 1956, a cigarette factory was constructed in Nairobi but until the late 1960s, there was little tobacco production in Kenya. As a result of deteriorating political situation within the East Africa Community gave impetus to the expansion of tobacco production in Kenya especially in the late sixties.

Tobacco production was organised by BAT on the concept of contract farming- a system whereby schemes or companies use small holders farmers to produce cash crops. BAT became the third British company to use the contract system in Western Kenya following initiatives in Tea and Sugar.²⁶ The BAT company considered Kuria District a best alternative area for tobacco growing after failed initiatives to grow tobacco in Oyugis, Rangwe and Kisii.²⁷ These areas were not suitable for tobacco cultivation and tobacco crop could suffer severe hail risk.²⁸ Stimulated by spectacular expansion of the consumption of blended cigarettes, and the support of the local Member of Parliament, the company intensified its advertising campaigns and established several centres for growing tobacco and headquartered at Taranganya. By the year 1972, tobacco growing was often encouraged in public places by the District Officers and the local chiefs. Soon the government through the local administration made the cultivation of tobacco an obligation so that there were a certain number of growers in each location.²⁹

By 1975, at least one out of three homesteads in the district were growing tobacco. Soon, Kuria became the second largest tobacco producer in Kenya.³⁰ Tobacco farming in general required substantial amount of wood for a variety of purposes: Firewood for curing, others used for constructing curing bans, poles and sticks for the preparation of tobacco prior to curing. It is estimated that by this time in one crop year at least 60 indigenous trees were cut to facilitate the expansion and curing of the crop. That meant that at least 3000 farmers then active in Bukuria

²⁵ R.A.H Murrow, “Prize Essays on Tobacco” The Daily Telegraph, 1899

²⁶ Mogens Buch-Hansen and Henrik Secher, "Contract Farming and the Peasantry: Cases from Western Kenya" in Review of African Political Economy, No. 23, 1982, p. 19

²⁷ Suzzette Heald, A Short Report on Patterns of Small Investment in Small-holder Agriculture, A Kenya Case Study, mimeo, 1987

²⁸ KNA/BV/7/7, Tobacco Production in Kenya, 1940-1969

²⁹ KNA/AE/22/216, British American Tobacco Kenya , 1956-1975

³⁰ KNA/DC/HB/2/2/22, Kehancha Division Monthly Report, 1976

were cutting down over 180000 indigenous trees per year so that by the year 1975, over 300000 indigenous trees in Bukuria had been destroyed.³¹

During his visit to the area in October 1975, Aggrey Luseno, the marketing Director of the BAT company in Kenya projected that through a thorough campaign, the company would work to achieve self-sufficiency in tobacco production by the year 1985.³² He therefore launched a campaign to promote the growing of the crop in the district. According to informants in the district, farmers were given incentives like free ploughing, inputs, wheel-barrow. Similarly, a few eucalyptus seedlings were distributed to farmers to meet the growing demand for firewood. Nevertheless, the local B.A.T officials were continued to encourage the use of indigenous trees for the purposes of curing tobacco on the understanding that:

"The smoke from these trees determines the aroma of the final cured leaf and it is therefore, essential that certain varieties of sources of fuel such as eucalyptus, cypress, pine, etc [exotic trees] which give unwanted smell must never be used, recommended sources of fuel are therefore, green leaves, and local African fig trees."³³

As a result of the campaign, tobacco reached its highest peak of production in 1982, it was reported that "Kuria has a tobacco boom"³⁴ the mean cash income rose in the ten-year period, from 7,059 to 57,599.6 Kenya shillings.³⁵ Kjerland wrote:

..the Abakuria in Kenya are successfully growing tobacco for the BAT and they are earning good money... people are forced to invest in object other than stock the iron sheeting was one sign...numerous local shops and bars others...Those who had extra money to spare invested in posho mills, high breed cattle and in canopied pick-up trucks-matatu"³⁶.

While Suzette observed that "indeed, the Bukuria appeared to be undergoing economic boom"³⁷ Kuria farmers like those of the Philippines in the late eighteenth Century were like gold miners, always hoping to strike it rich.³⁸ Tobacco also had brought about a number of positive changes to Bukuria. For one, it produced a rich class of people who bought cars and lorries; others installed grain grinding machines and bought grade cattle. These individuals included Gesabo Mwitwa, Maisori Itumbo, Mwitwa Nyagakende and Maroa Wantera to mention a few. The Abakuria used the money obtained from the sale of tobacco to purchase ploughs and other farm inputs. In other words, tobacco production brought about technological and technical innovations in the crop production. In this respect, the B.A.T. Company funded farmers, who in turn bought tractors and different ploughing implements. However, the BAT credit and paying system was geared towards keeping farmers financially indebted to the company making it difficult for them never to stop growing the crop at any given time.

³¹ Chacha, Babere Kerata, "Agricultural History of the Abakuria of Kenya From the End of the Nineteenth Century to the Mid 1970s," MA Thesis Egerton University, 1999, p. 183

³² Daily Nation Newspaper, October, 1975

³³ Ministry of Economic Planning, Economic Review of Agriculture Vol.2 No. 2, 1977. See also, British American Tobacco Kenya Annual Report, 1977.

³⁴ The Daily Nation Newspaper, September, 1982

³⁵ Suzette Heald, "Agricultural Intensification and the Decline of Pastoralism: A Case Study From Kenya," in Africa Vol 69, No. 2, 1999, p. 215

³⁶ Kirsten Alsaker Kjerland, The Belated Incorporation of the Abakuria into Modern Kenya, PhD Dissertation, University of Bergen, 1995. p. 289

³⁷ Suzette Heald, "Agricultural Intensification and the Decline of Pastoralism: A Case Study From Kenya," in Africa Vol 69, No. 2, 1999. p. 155

³⁸ The Tobacco Monopoly in the Philippines: Bureaucratic Enterprise and Social Change, 1756-1880, p. 87

According to the agricultural reports intensive tobacco farming was now a norm, but fallowing practices were abandoned and farms exposed to greater dangers of soil depletion due to over-cultivation.³⁹ In June 1987, the district suffered food crisis when Kuria District was faced with a serious famine that shattered peoples' hopes for a quick recovery. The tragedy proceeded by virulent crop diseases. This was followed by a terrible outbreak of cholera (ikinyamanche) believed to have spread from the neighboring Migori district this swept through the district between 1987-1989. The government as a result began to extend the construction of a larger Maize and Produce Board store at Kehancha for the purpose of requisitioning programme. The central authorities strove hard to control grain marketing, agricultural prices and movement of agricultural goods within the District.⁴⁰

Livestock population was reducing drastically and more Kuria farmers becoming tobacco contract producers for the BAT Company. " While Friedsberg commented that:

"Clearly, priorities have shifted in Kuria-agropastoralism. The hillside once dense with grazing cattle are now covered with a green-gold patchwork of [tobacco]... fields.... the cows are relatively few...the once mighty cow has lost all economic or social utility ...a colonial administrator might gaze upon such a scene with pleasure, but he could not fairly take a credit for its creation..".⁴¹

Tobacco contract farming undoubtedly gave an impetus to this development, as the Kuria were now impelled to produce in order to fulfill their increased consumption needs.

The peak of these exports in 1992, the company earned US\$ 3.7 million. Kuria District alone was producing 80% of the total tobacco production in Kenya⁴². This however, dropped to US\$1.6 million in 1993, with only about 400 tonnes being exported to the U.S, Europe and Egypt. This was attributed to confusion in the market occasioned by the entry of the new tobacco company in Bukuria, the Mastermind Tobacco Kenya (MTK) in 1989, which BAT claimed had led to a total breakdown in law and order within tobacco growing areas.⁴³

Many Kuria farmers took advantage of the entry of the new company into the market to sell their tobacco while evading to repay the loan advanced to them by BAT, while others went against the established tobacco growing calendar by growing out-of-season tobacco. Consequently, most of the tobacco was wiped out by diseases. A notable disease was the bushy top disease caused by farmers' failure to observe the close of the season, which requires them to uproot all stems after a tobacco season and start a fresh crop. As a result of this the leaf production went down from 10000 tonnes in 1989 to 5,000 tonnes in 1996.

The farmers complained of low payment by the BAT company and rigging of grades in a memorandum given to the PC. Soon it became apparent that this instability resulting from the unorthodox and haphazard operations could lead to the collapse of the tobacco industry in the area. The government stepped in and introduced a legislation that was known as Tobacco Growing and Marketing Act 1994 which *inter alia* decreed that tobacco sponsors must supply adequate quantities of seed quality to its contracted farmers sponsors are expected to provide tree nurseries that shall yield the wood fuel necessary for curing. Flue curing tobacco farmers are

³⁹ Ministry of Agriculture, Kehancha Division Monthly Reports, 1984

⁴⁰ Ministry of Agriculture, Kehancha Division, Monthly Report, June, 1988

⁴¹ S.Friedsberg, "Changing values," p. 18

⁴² African Farming, November/December, 1996

⁴³ *ibid*

required to plant more trees than their fire-curing counterparts. The key points of the 1994 legislation were also geared towards addressing belated environmental and farmers' occupational protection health issues, which had reached a dangerous level. The government outlawed the use of dangerous chemicals like the Dieldrin, DDT, Ambush, and Drinox, though farmers still continued to use the chemicals till the present. Equally, the by-laws were keen on encouraging the regulations of tree and forest cover in tobacco growing land⁴⁴.

In 1996 the KOTC a tobacco cooperative society in Kuria sent a memorandum to the BAT management claiming that tobacco crop was no longer benefiting them. In a separate meeting with the chairman of the BAT company for Kenya M.I Gechaga, - they held that Kuria District remained the only district in Nyanza province where rural development was not taking place and that since the company's operation in the area it had not employed any single person from the District. The memorandum read:

“We produce almost 80% of the total tobacco production in Kenya and the crop we produce is being used to provide employment to other people who do not grow it. This reminds us in colonial days when Kenya was producing cotton and exporting it to England for processing clothes and giving employment to the people of England. In Kenya today we have crop zoning, we build sugar Factory where sugarcane is grown, Tea industry where tea is grown and milk processing plants where milk is produced etc, etc...why should BAT build tobacco a sorting factory in Rongo where tobacco is not grown?”⁴⁵

They termed this as "daylight robbery and outright injustice" farmers therefore, threatened to boycott tobacco farming until the company ensured that the crop benefited them, the farmers *inter alia* complained of frustrations from the BAT staff and use of arrogant and rude language the report went on:

“This matter is of serious nature. If it is not discussed and solved for the benefit of the future generation of Kuria people, the production of tobacco in Kehancha division will cease. This is a message that should not be ignored by the BAT company, they must be addressed before the next planting season. The Abakuria are embittered and very much”⁴⁶.

Soon, the cooperative society was outlawed by the local government officials claiming that it had become "a hotbed of subversive politics" oral interviews however revealed that this had much to do with the BAT company. Still though the progress for the BAT in Kuria district was not uniformly smooth, individual clergymen attempted at various times to contain if not eliminate the growing of the crop in the district. As a requirement for full membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, adherents were to abandon their tobacco farms. Oral interviews reveal however that those clergy who preached against tobacco in the area often received warning and threatening leaflets from the BAT staff.

V. Tobacco and the Ecological Change in Kuria District

Tobacco is well known to be destructive, not only to the soil, but also to the forest resources. Indeed, Geist contends that tobacco production can indeed be a "driving force of

⁴⁴ Kenya Gazette, Tobacco Growing and Marketing Rules, 1994

⁴⁵ Samson Mwita Maroa, Memorandum, KOTC Society, 1996

⁴⁶ *ibid*

environmental change”, he writes that the crop generates good income and he concludes that tobacco poses a particularly difficult dilemma for development since its production generates both a range of employment, income, foreign exchange and other cash contributing effects, while the damage to the environment in the long term appears to outweigh the benefits. In his seminal study, he found out that deforestation in tobacco growing and Miombo covered countries by far exceeds that in tobacco producing countries of the same dry forests or woodland ecozone.⁴⁷ Other negative externalities that have been associated with the natural environments where tobacco is commonly grown are i.e., the absorption of high amounts of macro nutrients from the soil and the usage of large amounts of wood likely to contribute to the accelerated depletion of natural forests and woodlands.

According to Geist, as a key feature of it emerges that in the course of the 20th century African tobacco continental production has shifted from Northern Africa to countries in the central, eastern and predominantly southern part of the continent where the bulk of recent output originates. He writes:

“As a matter of fact - and taken here as a preliminary indicator of tobacco's environmental impact, from national data on recent tobacco expansion and deforestation it emerges that deforestation in tobacco growing and miombo covered countries by far exceeds that in non-tobacco producing countries of the same dry forest or woodland ecozone”⁴⁸

Kenya’s forests are rapidly declining mainly due to pressure from commercial farming. According to a recent report, tobacco agriculture and other land uses constitutes a greater percentage in forest destruction in Kenya. The productive area which forms about 20% of the country's area falls in the medium and high potential agro-ecological zones and is under agriculture, forest and nature reserves. According to FAO Forest Resource Assessment 1990, Kenya is classified among the countries with low forest cover of less than 2% of the total land area. The dwindling forest cover has a severe effect on the climate, wildlife, streams, human population especially forest dwellers.

In a study that was carried out in Kenya on the use of wood in tobacco industry, Fraser noted that "the area of all types of forests in Kenya is now below the level at which it is capable of meeting the current and future fuelwood demand on a sustainable basis"⁴⁹ This meant of course that accelerating deforestation can be expected, with potentially serious ecological consequences.

In March 1982, Bazinger reported that, "Tobacco production was responsible for the depletion of Forest in Meru District."⁵⁰ He wrote:

"Farmers in Kenya's Kunati Valley have stopped growing maize--the country's most important staple food--and are now growing tobacco for a multinational company...The slopes on the sides of the Kunati Valley, near Mount Kenya, are now completely bare. Their former covering of trees has been cut down to be used as fuel for curing tobacco”

With most of the fertile ground given over to tobacco, some farmers have tried to grow maize on the formerly forested hillsides. But heavy rains wash away soil, plants, and all. The topsoil has

⁴⁷ Helmut Geist, Tobacco: A Driving Force of Environmental Change in the Miombo Woodland Zone in Southern Africa, Paper presented at St. Antony's Conference of "African Environment, Past and Present, 1999. p. 10

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 13

⁴⁹ A.I Fraser, *The Use of Wood in Tobacco Industry in Kenya*, 1987, p.7

⁵⁰ Bazinger, "Tobacco Depletes Food-Crop Land," 28 *Smoke Signals* (3) 7 (March 1982).

eroded in some places, and rocks and boulders are already washing down toward the fertile fields below, the report says.

Tobacco growing certainly brings the farmers more profits than maize has done, so that what is happening in the Kunati Valley is being repeated in a thousand other places in all of Kenya. Exports are being promoted at the expense of local consumption. In the long run the ecological basis of all production is being permanently destroyed.⁵¹

Likewise, the burden of external debt has put immense pressure on African countries to maximize export production of remunerative cash crops such as tobacco at the expense of soil fertility, forest and water resources. Destruction of forests has therefore, become a nationwide problem in Kenya. In recent years, the consequences of depletion of Kenya's forest resources has ranged from an increased risk of drought to damage to the economy. Close canopy forests have had a crucial role to play as water catchments and much of this has been destroyed on Mount Kenya, which happens to have three-quarters of the indigenous forests in Kenya. The consequences have been water shortages and inadequate electricity supply in areas surrounding Nairobi.⁵²

The competing interests of tobacco agriculture, forest products and area utilization for a growing population on one side, and conservation of catchment on the other have resulted in a complex management issues, that are difficult to resolve. Indeed changing environments in Kuria district seems to be rooted in changing modes of production-from unexploited agro-pastoralism to intensive tobacco agriculture.

Owing to paucity of information and sources, it is difficult to reconstruct the environmental change in the district or even detail the physical environment of Kuria District prelude to the introduction of tobacco cultivation.⁵³ However, this study will be based partly from the perceptions of Kuria farmers on the changing soil quality and vegetation and partly from comments on government publications in the district concerning tobacco and the environment.

Joy Adamson for example, while visiting Kuria in the late 1950s wrote that "...living in untouched countryside, they (Kuria) are the most picturesque I have ever come across...and certainly the least affected by civilisation."⁵⁴ Writing in 1970, William Ochieng described Kuria as a "beautiful land with rolling hills". The first Kuria member of Parliament, Samson Mwita Maroa when asked in parliament for the house to vote for the establishment of the Farmers Training centre in Kuria, the Assistant minister for agriculture, Maina Wanjigi rebuked him saying: "how can we put such an institution in a remote area such as like Kuria? just in the bush".⁵⁵ Indeed such evidence would perhaps seem to suggest primitive precolonial realities, but Kuria maintained a resilience and sound ecological footing until the intensification of tobacco farming started in the area. Although isolated in many respects, rural Kuria society was far from placid and stagnant.

⁵¹ H.Geist, p. 20

⁵² See for example the IRIN Nairobi Report, 2 November, 2000,

⁵³ According to the Kenya National Archives Staff, aerial photograph was taken in an area covering Kuria District in 1945 by the East African Royal Airforce, the photograph is no longer in the Archives in Nairobi. This if found will be analysed in comparison to recent aerial photographs.

⁵⁴ Joy Adamson, The Peoples of Kenya, 1960

⁵⁵ An interview with Samson Mwita Maroa

After the introduction of tobacco, criticism of land usage in the district became a routine part of the official records.⁵⁶ Protection of thinning forests and destruction of catchment areas became a growing concern of agricultural staff. When population increased, and tobacco agriculture expanded, the landscape gradually became domesticated. From these reports it is clear that forest areas of Kurutiange and maeta were quickly and gradually invaded by prospective farmers. From the areas such as Naora and Ikerege, which had been used exclusively for cattle were being penetrated by tobacco farmers. Oral interviews show that some cattle owners in these areas began to sell off their lands to tobacco cultivators and as land got scarce, they continued to migrate into Musoma, Mugumu and Serengeti areas in Tanzania where they continued with their pastoral life.

To enhance production of tobacco, the B.A.T company would supply farmers with hazardous chemicals and fertilizers. One report indicates that agricultural officials in Kehancha complained that:

"these chemicals are destroying the soils ability to withstand continuous cultivation ..particularly of maize, cultivation of maize is almost impossible after a field has been cultivated for two or more seasons"

In 1983, Bazinger returned to Kenya with a view of studying tobacco farming. After touring the both Kuria and Kunati Valley in Meru District, he found out that tobacco farming was detrimental to Kenya's indigenous forests. He also noted that farmers were progressively reducing maize growing in favour of tobacco. He published his findings in both Kenyan and German local dailies, entitled: "The Lure for Easy Money: Tobacco Brings Destruction to Forests in Kenya." Some of his findings were taken into account for the National Food Policy in 1984.⁵⁷ This specified that BAT must ensure that each tobacco farmer in tobacco growing areas had to spare a certain percentage of land for the production of food crops. However, the BAT company sorted to be exonerated from this blame; the company therefore funded a research that went into establishing the impact tobacco farming had on food production. The findings were summarized as follows:

Taking per hectare gross margins as indication of profitability, tobacco is the most profitable among the enterprises examined in Migori (Kuria included), tobacco enterprise complements food production such that an increase in tobacco production would increase food production. That tobacco production increases afforestation process..etc⁵⁸

However, there were many cases of disastrous soil erosion. In due cause, permanent rivers such as Nyangoto and Kwigancha, which had been main catchment areas in the district for both human and livestock, became intermittent. In other places, the streams, when they continued to flow, became silt laden.

It was not until 1983 that BAT established an afforestation programme based on eucalyptus species so that by 1995 a tree audit report released by Moi University in Eldoret, the

⁵⁶ See for example, Ministry of Agriculture Monthly Reports for Kenhancha Division , 1979-1988, Ministry of Natural Resources Annual Reports, and Provincial Tree Audit Annual Report for the same period

⁵⁷ R. Bazinger, The Lure For Easy Money: Tobacco Brings Destruction to Kenya Forests, The Daily Nation, October 10, 1984

⁵⁸ L.A Oyugi, A.W Mukhebi, W.M Mwangi, "The Impact of Cash Cropping of Food Production: A Case Study of Tobacco and Maize in Migori District of Kenya" in Eastern Africa Economic Vol. 3 No. 1, 1997 p. 43

company's afforestation programme had over 40 million surviving trees planted by its contracted farmers and public institutions near leaf growing areas and indeed, a casual visitor to Kuria District could not help to recognize the preponderance of blue gum tree species in the region. An incongruous symmetry had evolved as farms had now been demarcated with hedges. The natural forests (*imiyuyi*) of Kurutiange, Ikerege, Kebarooti areas for example had been cleared off and replaced by numerous tobacco farms. Natural regrowth of the natural forest in these area according to the forestry department, is about 75 years. Although the exploitation of indigenous forest was banned by the president in 1984, a report indicates that the use of these products have reached an epidemic proportion. Much favoured camphor *Ocotea usambarensis* is almost wiped out, equally, a number of indigenous species like *Fagara macrophylla*, *Olea capensis*, *Poloscias kikuyensis* etc have been extensively used for construction of curing bans in the district.

As mentioned early on, the aroma of the final cured tobacco especially of the flue-cured tobacco depended on the nature of tree used in curing, for this reason, the BAT staff continued to encourage farmers to use other sources than eucalyptus to so that what was happening in the district was a transformation from indigenous vegetation into an exotic eucalyptus one. Very rare species such as *markahamia*, *platylx grevillea robusta* and fig trees were often preferred for curing purposes. A survey report indicates that by 1985, the proportion of fuelwood for fire-curing derived from the indigenous woods amounted to 93 per cent. Another report indicates that by 1996, the gazette forest in the district had reduced to only 44.3 hectares and the rest of the forest estates falling under the Kehancha Town Council had been depleted and replaced with eucalyptus species.⁵⁹

In 1995, the soil and water conservation was stated by the Swedish government through SIDA the overall objective of the project was to ensure increased and "sustainable farm productivity with minimum soil loss and damage to the environment". Underlying the formation of the project was that some parts of the district were seriously experiencing erosion in tobacco farms. Along with this the focus was on the afforestation targeted places along the rivers, on farmlands and hilltops. A report from the ministry stated that:

"People of Nyangogo (west of Kuria District) have been spared the major destruction as they have not ventured fully into tobacco farming."⁶⁰

According to wood report in 1996, one tobacco farmer was using 28 tonnes of trees per hectare, 6500 farmers were therefore using 184 tonnes per year and in five years the projection was that they would use 944,000 of wood by the year 2001. And in 1997, when Kuria district released its first District development Plan for the years 1997-2001, it stated *inter alia* that:

"although the climate of the district favours the growth of natural forests, to a large extent, these have been virtually depleted through exploitation of the tobacco industry...there is a need for a new forestry legislation in the area"⁶¹.

The above sources are just a few evidence that proves that there has indeed been a change of environment in Kuria district, following the establishment of tobacco. The District at present still produces 80% of total tobacco export from Kenya and the government puts pressure on the district to maximise production of the crop. The matter becomes complex when the British-American Tobacco contribution to the government revenue over a period of ten years i.e 1986-

⁵⁹ Ministry of Lands and Settlement Kehancha Division Land Survey.

⁶⁰ Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock Development and Marketing, Kuria District, Annual Work Programme, 1995, p. 45

⁶¹ Kuria District Development Plan, 1997-2000.

1996 amounted to 5.6 billion Kenyan shillings making it an equivalent of 5% of the total government revenue for that year therefore, placing the company among the highest revenue generators in the country. Equally the company earned \$92 million in foreign exchange between 1986 and 1996 through leaf exports.

According to oral interviews conducted between March and June 1998 in four locations in the district, seems to tally with the official government records I have sited above so far. For instance, most respondents held that a great deal of changes have taken place in their localities. In comparing with the years after independence and after the introduction of tobacco, their description of environmental change is dominated by answers depicting decline in forest resources. Their descriptions of past environment included the use of words such as *imiyuuyi* and *ibikongo, irisissi* -- words that describe different types of forest and most comments emphasize how income has reduced the tobacco dominant role of livestock.

VI. Conclusion

Despite maintaining peripheral position throughout the colonial period, after independence Kuria emerged as one of the richest and most productive Divisions in Nyanza. Production of food crops such as maize, millet, sorghum and cassava constituted a high percentage of the annual food supply in the country. Together with livestock resources, the area had achieved a high degree of self-sufficiency in food production. Later in the sixties, tobacco was introduced in the area under the aegis of the British-American Tobacco Company (B.A.T), stimulated by spectacular expansion of the consumption of blended cigarettes in the world market. The company began a vigorous campaign to contract farmers to grow the crop. Furthermore, this was an area where experimentation with cash crops had not been done successfully hence no competition with other cash crops. Consequently, the crop gained popularity as it fetched better prices which maize, millet and cattle industries had failed to produce. The government supported this initiative as a worthy agricultural expansion for rural development. Accompanying this was unprecedented flow of cash into the district so that in fact, by the mid-1980s and early 90's tobacco farmers were celebrating the "tobacco boom". Livestock population was reduced drastically as more Kuria cattle owners moved to Tanzania and others becoming tobacco contract producers for the BAT company.

Beginning from the late 1990s, however, there was a different story. The area suffered repeated food shortages and was occasionally threatened by hunger, and in 1997 the government was supplying food relief to the people of Buirege division after the area had been declared a hardship zone. The depletion of forests and the destruction of catchment areas and riverbanks have been issues of journalistic coverage over the past six years and the ministry of Agriculture Annual Reports and National Cereals and Produce Board annual reports have registered a sharp decline in food-crop production. Consequently, early in the year 2000 the Poverty Eradication Program sponsored by the World Bank in conjunction with the Government of Kenya ranked Kuria District amongst the 10 poorest Districts in Kenya. My proposed study therefore, impinges upon the premise that the Abakuria (people of Kuria District) who seem to be in this perpetual crisis have been transformed by powerful forces of an international conglomerate in the course of few decades, from self-sufficient and haughty independent-minded tribesmen into poverty-stricken famine relief clients now living on ecological as well as political margins of the Kenyan society.

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