

Labour Dynamics in Kenya's Pre-Capitalist Bukusu Economy and Society

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Abstract

The study investigated the nature of the pre-capitalist Bukusu society in Kimilili, Kenya and the role of labour in the economy, using the dependency theory. The theory states that the underdevelopment of the Third World was due to the historical evolution of a highly unequal international capitalist system. Contact between the developed and underdeveloped countries leads to intensification of underdevelopment in the peripheries. The issue of labour is presently a central theme in Kenyan history. However, the study on labour dynamics in Kenya's pre-colonial societies has been one of the most neglected areas. Labour dynamics in the pre-colonial Bukusu society in Kimilili has not been properly studied with earlier works focusing on labour on European farms and towns. Early studies are also generalised hence the need to present a systematic analysis (document) of the social, economic and political processes as pertains to pre-colonial labour in Kimilili. The study was based on archival research, oral interviews as well as analysing the existing literature on socio-economic history in general and labour history in particular. The study examined how the Babukusu provided for their livelihood by harnessing the natural endowments of their environment. It surveyed the main economic activities, stressing the economic options open to them. This involved a closer examination of the various practices of production among the Babukusu in the period 1895-1963. Further, it examined land tenure system, forms of pre-colonial labour, labour organization and economic practices among the Babukusu. It was further revealed that the Babukusu were a dynamic community with their pre-colonial economic structures adapting to changes in the environment. In addition to subsistence needs, the Babukusu economy encouraged the development of surplus disposal. The study contributes to a wider understanding of labour dynamics in pre colonial Africa and labour history in Kenya. Policy planners can apply knowledge from this study to inject dynamism in labour issues by designing favourable policies. Scholars, on the other hand can use this study to further research, innovate and expand the frontiers of knowledge on pre colonial economies in Africa.

Keywords: Kenya, pre-capitalist bukusu society, role, labour, economy.

INTRODUCTION

Hopkins (1970) and Bernstein (1976) have discussed issues relating to pre-colonial labour. Bernstein (ibid.), in *Underdevelopment and Development*, postulates that colonialism destroyed the indigenous economy which was characterized by kinship production and exchange through withdrawal of labour from traditional forms of production and by monetization. Thus, the indigenous economy was constrained, forcing rural producers into either wage labour or commodity production. However, the whole reproductive cycle of the African economy was not destroyed but was only partially altered. In Kimilili, Kenya, the nascent agricultural capitalism never dismantled African production, it was altered to adapt itself to the interests of capitalism. African labourers continued to be producers through their access to land and use of family labour.

This paper supports the view that despite wage labour on the European farms, the Babukusu still continued with their agricultural production.

Writing with reference to pre-colonial economy of West Africa, Hopkins (ibid.) maintains that the area exhibited a diversified economy characterized by agricultural pursuits, trade and craft. Hopkins (ibid.) further contends that a constricted market constitutes a major impediment to complete development or transformation of these economies. There is need to examine these issues in relation to pre-colonial Bukusu economy and labour systems in particular. Demanding scholarly attention is the analysis of the features of the Babukusu pre-colonial economy which made it resilient to colonial capitalist penetration particularly in the initial stages of encounter.

The colonial anthropologist, Wagner (1970) has focused on the Babukusu and the Abalogoli and examines the kinship structure and magico-religious beliefs and practices in the two communities. Using this work, we can explain the rise of wage labour among the Babukusu, given that they were relatively self-sufficient at the establishment of colonial rule. In his earlier work, Wagner (ibid.) examines the pre-

colonial family and its changing patterns as it interacted with the colonial economy. While this work addresses important issues inherent in the Babukusu and Abalogoli colonial economy, its scope of analysis is general and not representative. On the other hand, Kitching (1980) argues that there was both quantitative and qualitative underutilization of labour in Africa during the pre-colonial period. According to Kitching (ibid.), women were the bread winners while men dinned on unproductive ventures and parasitism. This is an oversight because men had other societal obligations like hut building, clearing forests and breaking virgin land, while women had defined roles and general domestic chores. On the causes of wage labour provision, Kitching (ibid.) states that the colonial government pioneered labour power intensification and redistribution; a pointer to the study on labour in Kimilili

Need to Understand the Pre-colonial Labour System

A lot of literature has emerged and the issue of labour is presently a central theme in Kenyan history. However pre colonial economy and more specifically the history of labour dynamics in Kenya's pre-colonial societies has been one of the most neglected yet interesting stories which remain to be told in full. Labour dynamics in the pre-colonial Bukusu society in Kimilili has not been properly studied. Earlier works dealt with labour on European farms and towns, ignoring labour dynamics in pre-colonial Bukusu society. Early studies are generalised works hence scholars need to study at micro level and present a systematic analysis. The social, economic and political processes as pertains to pre-colonial labour in Kimilili have not been well documented. Not only is it important to focus attention on pre colonial labour, but the period upon which the research centres represents an important epoch in Kenya's Bukusu Society.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This paper is limited to a study of labour dynamics in the pre-colonial Bukusu economy and society in Kimilili. Although the paper mainly focused on the social and economic effects of labour dynamics in the pre-colonial Bukusu society, the findings may be generalised to other societies, in Kenya or Africa, that share the same historical and socio-economic characteristics.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Kimilili Division, situated in the expansive Bungoma District in Kenya. It is bordered by Mount Elgon District to the North, Bokoli Location (Webuye Division) to the South, Sirisia Division to the West, Saboti Division of Trans Nzoia District, and the expansive Tongaren Division of Bungoma to the East. Kimilili Division consists of Maeni, Kibingei, Chesamisi, Kimilili and

Kamukuywa locations. During the colonial period, it was a buffer zone between the European owned farms in Tongaren Division and Trans Nzoia District. The area consists of volcanic and alluvial soils on the slopes of Mount Elgon which support a number of crops, namely coffee, bananas, sugar cane, maize, potatoes, groundnuts, onions, tomatoes, fruits, beans, and sunflower among others. Livestock keeping is also a predominant feature in this area. In general, the inhabitants of the area practise mixed farming.

This study drew extensively from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were of two categories: archival materials obtained from the Kenya National Archives (KNA) and oral interviews. Oral interviews involved posing questions to elderly people. These informants provided data underscoring and conceptualizing the question of labour dynamics in pre-capitalist Bukusu economy and society. The questions covered pre-capitalism, forms of labour organization and the means of production in Bukusu pre-capitalist society. Save for pockets of Iteso, Sabaot and Tachoni, Kimilili is inhabited by the Babukusu. The author carried out the interviews in the *Lubukusu* language. Archival research was conducted at the Kenya National Archives (KNA) in Nairobi. Archival sources were used to either to refute or corroborate, authenticate and supplement secondary data. It also used Secondary information on labour and socio-economic history of Kenya in general.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Land Acquisition and Tenure System among the Babukusu

The importance of land in production is viewed as supplying man with material needs of life (Kenyatta, 1971). According to Van Zwenenberg *et al.* (1977), land tenure is a person's right to own and hold land as property. Land was owned communally among the Babukusu, emphasising individual right to utilize the land but not own it. After harvesting, land usually reverted to collective clan and/or community ownership; true in Africa societies. Accordingly, the community was the proprietor of all the land within its settlement area (Fearn, 1961, p. 33). Thus the report of a Committee on Native Land Tenure in the North Kavirondo reserve notes that:

...the ethnic community and its land are one and indissoluble. The land is the home of the ethnic community. It has been acquired by the ethnic community as a homogeneous unit, it had from earliest times been defended by the ethnic community and all disputed or even debatable questions relating to the land or its people were according to custom decided by ethnic group leader (KNA: PC/NZA/2/2/4).

Broadly, land among the Babukusu was owned by the entire sub-ethnic community and according to oral

traditions, they rallied their energies to eject any external aggression that threatened to impinge on their land (Wanambisi Wasilwa, OI, October 21, 2001). Ownership of land was primarily vested in clans and it was by virtue of one's membership in a clan that he was accorded ownership of a portion of the communally owned land for use (Wechulo Welubengo, OI, October 17, 2001). Thus, kinship system and land holding mechanism were closely linked in that a man's right to use it hinged upon the legitimacy of his affinity to the wider community. In pre-colonial Babukusu society, clan elders exercised trusteeship over clan land to various households within their areas of jurisdiction. It was the responsibility of clan elders to decide how and when it was deemed necessary to move to new lands. Clan elders also arbitrated land disputes between and/or among the different households. As tokens of appreciation, they received gifts in kind (*kamakata*), comprising chicken, goats, sheep and even grain from the warring parties (Diminah Nabalayo, OI, October 23, 2001). Consistent family cultivation also determined the rights of occupation of land. Thus, the extended family was the basic functional unit of land ownership. It is of crucial importance to highlight that in spite of the influence of clan elders in relation to land issues, land among the Babukusu remained an inalienable asset (Joseck Kamulamba, OI, October 23, 2001). According to Wickins (1981), access to land in Africa usually remained a right inherent in membership of the community.

The Babukusu acquired land in several ways. According to oral traditions, conquest appears to have been the primary way of acquiring land often dislodged groups ahead and assumed possession of conquered land. Parts of the land presently inhabited by the Babukusu were acquired in this manner against the Sabaots, Iteso, Tachoni and Kabras (Albert Nabwana, OI, November 9, 2001). The role of conquest as a primary means of acquiring land in the pre-colonial period assumed greater importance during times of famine, ecological crises and during inter-ethnic wars (Fearn, 1961, p. 33). This is echoed by report of the Committee on Native Land Tenure in the North Kavirondo reserve, which among other things states that:

Practically every ethnic group has a history of migration from some place outside its Origin to an ancestor who is said to have come in search of a home for himself and his family. Their present holdings were in all cases acquired either by right of first occupation of uninhabited land or by conquest (KNA: PC/NZA/2/2/4).

At individual level, land acquisition was often by right of cultivation of a piece of land (Richard Twang', OI, December 11, 2001). Generally, anyone who took the first initiative to clear virgin forest (*kumusiru*) practically acquired the right of

cultivation over that piece of land. In other words, individual members acquired land by merely cultivating virgin bush land (*lirome*). Third land was acquired through inheritance of ancestral land. Among the Babukusu, one inherited his grandfather's land either in whole or in part (Nato Mukhalisi, OI, December 13, 2001). One could acquire land by direct apportionment by the father. This became the most prevalent way of acquiring land later when population growth exerted pressure on land making the resource relatively scarce. However, land was only allocated to men who were married.

The traditional attitude towards land among the Babukusu was determined by the patrilineal clan organization. Rights to land by individuals were gained through membership in the smaller segments of a patrilineal system, represented by the basic unit, a household. This patrilineal organization based on the clan (*ekholo*) precluded women from land ownership as they could only obtain rights to use land through marriage. Hence, married women gained rights to land through husbands (Nato Mukhalisi, OI, December 13, 2001). Husbands assigned land to women and women's rights to land were directly dependent on their membership in the homestead. Women, it was believed, had the propensity to withdraw to their original communities or clan in the event of serious domestic disputes (Nato Mukhalisi, OI, December 13, 2001).

Although it has been pointed out in the foregoing discussion that land was inalienable and that every individual had rights of occupancy and use of land among the Babukusu, clan land wholly belonged to all the members of the clan in question. Oral information also points out that, among the Babukusu, land acquired by a specific clan was not open to other clans (Elizabeth Nabututu, OI, September 2, 2001). However, these rules were at times flexed with the consent of the clan elders, and in that sense, it was permissible to allocate some land to relatives who were non-clan members (*balebe*). *Balebe* erected a hut and cultivated land on a probation period as their character was judged. Whenever one was deemed not to have conformed to the dictates of the host clan, he was rejected. A person who held land in such a manner was called a tenant holder (*omumunya*). Until the advent of colonial capitalism, this practice was held in high esteem.

Grazing land (*kamayilwe*) and salt-licks (*bilongo*) among the Babukusu were held communally. Each clan set aside a substantial part of land for cattle grazing for the community as a whole. Similarly salt-licks were communal property to which cattle of all members of the clan had unrestricted access. Clan elders had the responsibility of determining the pastures and safeguard the salt-lick from abuse and

misuse. Batumayo Nayele (OI, October 10, 2001) notes that:

Cattle could be driven to the lowlands for grazing; after which (cattle) were led to the salt-lick, and in the evening, they retreated back home, each herd heading to the homestead where they belonged.

From the foregoing analysis of pre-colonial land acquisition and land tenure, the area in which a man could obtain the right to cultivate was first contingent upon the area occupied by this sub-ethnic group and the extent by his clan. It has been emphasized that individual land ownership largely non-existent and rights to cultivate land were vested in kinship units exemplified by both the extended family and clan (Charles Kisembe, OI, December 24, 2001). Hence, an examination of forms of labour mobilization in the pre-colonial Babukusu society proceeds from this point.

Forms of Pre-colonial Labour

Labour, like land, is a very crucial factor in the production process. Pre-colonial labour relations are therefore determined the structure of the pre-colonial African economies. Writing on utilization of labour time in pre-colonial Kenya, Kitching (1980) argues that male labour time was both quantitatively and qualitatively underutilized not invested and expended in material production. However, research findings on labour among the Babukusu largely contradict Kitching's (ibid.) contention. Kitching's (1980) view might have a limited applicability for some societies in the colonial period, when most of the pre-colonial activities that absorbed male labour time such as hunting, crafts and other extractive activities were largely disparaged by the demands of the colonial economy. However, it should be noted that while land was relatively abundant, labour was critically short, factor misunderstood by the likes of Kitching.

Among the Babukusu, there was no specialization of functions based on gender, although certain tasks were separately performed by men, and women (William Wasike, OI, October 22, 2001). Men and women jointly performed the bulk of agricultural duties such as planting, weeding and harvesting. Men did heavy work of land clearing entailing slashing the bush and burning the slashed dry grass or shrubs. Digging among the Babukusu was dominated by women. Outside the farm, women busied themselves with domestic tasks such as child rearing and preparation of food to feed the entire household. Men exclusively built houses, fenced, engaged in hunting expeditions and handcrafts production. Forms of pre-colonial labour were mainly communal among the Babukusu; with no rigid specialization of roles. Basic forms of pre-colonial labour were therefore tied to agriculture, livestock keeping, industry and domestic crafts.

Farming Techniques and Labour Organization

The main constraint on farm produce is labour and the technology employed in production. According to Van Zwanenberget *et al.* (1977), in the 19th century, abundance of land, its fertility and the technology used to farm were the main factors which affected land use. These factors gave shifting cultivation predominance to allow land to regain fertility and avoid extensive weeding when a farm grew old. The Babukusu used digging sticks (*biichu/biini*) prepared from hard wood sharpened and hardened by firing (*khumama*). Digging sticks were also used for planting of seeds and during the dry season an iron head was fixed to ease the making of holes (Vincent Wekesa, OI, October 4, 2001). In addition, the introduction of iron technology (*bubasi*) led to the making of iron hoes led to improved agriculture.

Axes and machetes initially were used to clear the land for farming. Specifically, axes were used to fell big and hard trees. The Babukusu used oxen (*chieyi*) to plough but relied heavily on human labour to break virgin land (Simiyu Lukongo, OI, October 20, 2001). Shifting cultivation was used to allow land regain fertility, plus use of farm manure, crop rotation and intercropping. In the pre-colonial period, a variety of crops were grown for domestic consumption. Oral interview information pointed out that these crops were grown throughout the year. Thus the Bukusu farmer was occupied year round. This refutes allegations by Kitching (1980) that in pre-colonial Kenya, labour time was underutilised both qualitatively and quantitatively in material production for a large part of working period, especially by men who spent time drinking beer (Kitching, 1980). This is because Kitching (ibid.) does not understand labour relations in the pre-colonial period and was tempted to conclude such since by then men had been displaced by forces of capitalism. Most pre-colonial activities like hunting, fencing the homestead, erecting houses, bee-hive making, among others, had diminished leaving men with more leisure time than women. To illustrate the weakness of Kitching's (1980) work, this paper attempts to show how labour was organized to ensure self-sufficiency of the household and the community at large.

Farm preparation, required endurance and men fully participated in clearing land for cultivation. A man was despised if his wife worked on abandoned gardens because he was unable to clear virgin land. Clearing of virgin farms (*lirome*) was between November and December before tress shed their leaves. If one required a large farm, he sought help from other men through communal labour or co-operative labour (Batumayo Nayele, OI, October 10, 2001). Sometimes people were tasked to clear land in exchange for a goat or grain (Wepukhulu Wanami, OI, October 20, 2001). Fencing was also done. These activities were exclusively a man's affair (James

Wakhungu, OI, September 1, 2001). If certain portions were not burnt, family members prepared heaps which they later burnt (Wepukhulu Luteka, OI, September 1, 2001). Old farms (*chisambu*) required less labour than virgin land, and therefore, women prepared them for planting. Planting involved the whole family where apart from broadcasting seed, men made holes with either hoes or long planting sticks, while women and children put seeds in the holes and buried them as protection against birds. Young men guarded the holes in the morning and evenings against birds and other predators (Maurice Mumalasi, OI, September 1, 2001). Weeding was basically the work of women and children, while harvesting involved men, women and children. Storing and threshing was done by women. From this analysis, it is evident that, all members of the household participated in farming activities to ensure self-sufficiency of the household.

While the extended family unit was the main engine of production among the Babukusu in the pre-colonial times, it became necessary from time to time to enlist the services of a work party or cooperative labour which was called *bubwasio*. Work parties enabled the household to accomplish various agricultural and other economic activities within the time of the agricultural cycle. The work parties, a form of communal labour were organized along reciprocal kinship lines and members worked on each other's fields in turns. Labour of either the household or kinship work groups was not paid for, but often the owner of the field would entertain workers with locally brewed beer otherwise called *kwete* among the Babukusu. The beer (*kwete*) and work songs reduced the tedium associated with African farming. According to oral information, as noted by Julius Namachanja Mabolo (2001, OI, September 1), the Babukusu had "beer for weeding, for planting and for harvesting". Other gestures of appreciation made to a work group included gifts of elusive (*bulo*) milk and cow meat. Children were generally socialized into their parents' occupation depending on their gender. As they advanced in age, children gradually began to work with boys working alongside their fathers while girls assisted their mothers.

Agricultural Labour

According to Maxon (1992), agriculture holds a central importance in Kenyan history. Just as food production which has so radically transformed man's lifestyle, it is believed to have penetrated the East African region from outside. But it should be noted that agriculture has been and still is the main means of subsistence and social security of households of many Kenyan communities. It was evidently clear from their traditions that the Babukusu were and are still primarily an agricultural people with food production forming the most important activity (John Manguliechi, OI, November 4, 2001). Livestock

keeping, hunting and gathering appear to have a secondary or subordinate position to crop production. Since land was abundant relative to the period under review, farm lands were usually concentrated at one time in a more central place behind the settlements for maximum security and facilitate the pooling of scarce labour resource (Jestimoah Webi, OI, November 4, 2001). These central cultivation places were known as *endimilo* and could sustain three or four planting seasons before new fields were cleared. Agricultural activities were sparked off by clan elders by first surveying the clan land to identify the fertile zone. This reflects the extent of their accumulated experience in traditional agriculture. From the nature of the vegetation, Babukusu elders could make a reasonable estimate of the level of the fertility of the soil. Van Zwanenberg and King (1977) contend that agricultural systems were based on the intimate knowledge of local rain and soil conditions, and on affiliating with the characteristics of indigenous trees, grasses and plants. This view is also held by the traditions of the Babukusu. Having determined the suitable land for farming according to fertility levels of the soil, the clan elders then directed the clan members where to clear the bush for cultivation.

Generally, crops grown in pre-colonial Babukusu included sorghum, finger millet, simsim, black peas, green grams speckled maize, beans, cow peas, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, bananas and leafy vegetable (John Manguliechi, OI November 4, 2001). The intensity and seasonal distribution of rainfall in the area of study favoured agriculture. The presence of the long rainy seasons (*kumunane*), March to July, and a short rainy season, September to December, enhanced a possible double cropping system each year. Sorghum and finger millet were grown during the long rainy season. Both crops were the staple crops in pre-colonial Babukusu. Crops such as sweet potatoes, simsim, black peas, beans, green grams and speckled maize were grown during the short rains, because they could ripen in a short period of about three months. The banana was grown within the homestead and was the most important permanent crop.

A part from the main fields which were somewhat far removed from the homestead, it was customary among the Babukusu to have kitchen or backyard gardens (*libumbi*) around their houses. In the gardens pumpkins, gourds, and a diversity of green vegetables that were consumed locally were planted. Maize which is a staple crop in many Kenyan communities today took a very insignificant place in pre-colonial Babukusaland (Nato Mukhalisi, OI, December 13, 2001). The Babukusu in the pre-colonial times only grew few speckled maize. Maize was taken as a hunger breaker crop. This probably influenced Austen's (1987) observation that before the colonial

times, maize seldom became a dominant crop or even an important dietary supplement.

The cycle of agricultural activities throughout the year depended on the rainfall pattern. The clan elders ceremonially initiated each activity in the production agricultural cycle. On the eve of the planting season, all the agricultural implements that could be used were taken to the residence of the clan elder, where they stayed overnight to be blessed. The blessing performed by the clan elder was meant to attract a bumper harvest. In the morning, the clan elder and the whole clan left for the fields where he set the pace by breaking the earth with his own hoe before the digging season was declared open to all members of the clan. In the same vein, sowing, weeding and harvesting were preceded by ceremonies initiated and presided over by clan elders.

Livestock Keeping and Related Labour Activities

The Babukusu as earlier mentioned practiced a mixed economy. They, in fact, practiced a farming system combining agricultural and livestock production, a cropping mode of production in which surplus produce was invested in the accumulation of cattle (Aseka, 1989). In many predominantly agricultural societies, acquisition and ownership of cattle was an important ingredient of wealth and prestige. Among the Babukusu, as in many pre-colonial African societies, which practiced a mixed economy, sedentary pastoralism was the next most important mode of production after agriculture and so was the issue of pastoral labour (Ngwengwe Lukorito, OI, December 5, 2001). The Babukusu reared cattle, sheep, goats, as well kept poultry. The accumulation of surplus grain was the basic step in the process of acquiring livestock among the Babukusu. This was because in times of famine, grain was bartered for livestock, especially goats and sheep. Through natural reproduction, their population increased and were subsequently exchanged for cattle which increased naturally (Richard Twang', OI, December 11, 2001, OI). Thus, agriculture and livestock keeping reinforced each other.

Marriage system was another method by which livestock were acquired. Bride price was paid in the form of cattle so that bride wealth was decidedly instrumental in wealth accumulation process of the Babukusu in the pre-colonial period (Simiyu Tembula, OI, December 18, 2001). As a token of appreciation the Babukusu paid 13 cattle, with thirteen representing twelve Babukusu clan clusters, one for the girl's mother's clan as standard bride price. Women were also means by which labour was reproduced. It was on these complex social networks that the maintenance and reproduction of the social structure depended (Wycliffe Muchwenge, OI, December 23, 2001). To avoid a wholesale annihilation of a herd of cattle in the event of a raid or disease, the system of pledging and loaning out

cattle was yet another means by which the Babukusu could acquire cattle. This was called *khukhwekekhha* among the Babukusu. In this arrangement, the borrower in practice merely tended cattle for the owner, but, enjoyed benefits such as milk, ghee and occasionally blood, and was awarded a heifer in the event of the owner withdrawing the herd. The borrower was also rewarded if the number of calves increased as he tended the herd (Dimina Nabaloyo, OI, October 23, 2001). Cattle could also be inherited from one's parents. Although raiding was an important method of acquiring livestock among other Kenyan communities, there is no evidence to support the view that the Babukusu acquired cattle through raids.

Babukusu traditions are unequivocal that ownership of cattle and generally livestock was the preserve of men (Dimina Nabaloyo, OI, October 23, 2001). The function of livestock as a store of wealth and a measure of standard value, made cattle a very valuable commodity, hotly contested for. Women guarded livestock and milked, while boys guarded calves. Male members of the society looked after livestock, and were responsible for all transactions related to the transfer of livestock in kinship relations. Their control over this valuable resource made it possible for older men to exert a domineering influence. Young folks were compelled to rely on them for cattle (bride price) to obtain wives. It can therefore be argued that exclusive male ownership of livestock in the pre-colonial Babukusu society enabled them to occupy higher positions in the accumulation circle. This primarily explains why livestock was taken as a measure of wealth and a high status symbol among the Babukusu. Socially, livestock was important in ritual ceremonies. In particular, sheep and goats were frequently used in sacrificial feasts. Incessant calamities like droughts, pestilence, famine and high mortality rate or perpetual crop failure were interpreted as implied anger of ancestral spirits and called for an appeasement ceremony. Slaughtering of livestock served such a purpose. This underscores the social embeddedness of the economic system of the Babukusu. Besides their exchange value, skins derived from livestock could be fashioned into shields for protection and/or used as sleeping mats, clothing among other uses. Generally, keeping of livestock was very significant in the pre-colonial economy of the Babukusu. Livestock products such as meat, milk and blood were important in the Babukusu diet. They supplemented the otherwise predominantly carbohydrates based diet. Livestock were also slaughtered during ceremonies and festivities, for example initiation and marriage ceremonies.

Hunting and Gathering

Besides agriculture and livestock keeping, hunting and gathering were vital aspects of the Babukusu

economy. They engaged in what Ongutu (1985) terms sedentary hunting and gathering. He holds the view that, sedentary hunting is that type of hunting carried out by an agricultural population whose involvement is purely on a part-time basis. In pre-colonial Babukusu society, hunting and gathering were not only supplementary but complementary to both agriculture and livestock keeping. Oral interview evidence among the Babukusu points to two major reasons, which gave impetus to hunting. First, it was to procure game meat which was an important source of protein (Zablon Wanyonyi, OI, December 15, 2001) and was also engendered by the need to curb the damage of crops by wild animals (Joseph Manyo, OI, November 23, 2001).

Hunting among the Babukusu was an informal activity limited to men. In most cases, one man often started the chase and others responded by characteristic screams and subsequently came together to form a hunting party. An animal was detected from its hideout by tracing its footprints guided by specially trained hunting dogs. A second hunting method was through traps locally known as *lurimba*. *Lurimba* was made from reeds, woven to form a kind of net. Having detected the animal in its hideout and ascertained the possible direction it would take, the trap was laid on its path. The animal would then be ambushed and chased towards the trap from where it was killed by spearing, stabbing and clubbing. This method of hunting involved small animals like the hare, rabbits, antelopes and porcupines among others. Big animals were also hunted including elephants and buffalos. Their hunting involved first digging a ditch on their path. The top of the ditch was covered with vegetation to camouflage the site to make it look natural. Hunters then withdrew to hiding places. If and when the noise of an animal was heard, the hunters rushed to the scene to kill the prey trapped in the ditch (Jamin Wambakaya, OI, November 9, 2001). Hunting in Babukusu society was mostly undertaken in the middle of the year in relation to the pre-colonial agricultural cycle. This was usually the off-farm period, when pressure of farm work had slackened. The desire to protect crops appeared to have been an additional factor for programming hunting then (Makwingwi, OI, October 23, 2001).

The importance of hunting in pre-colonial Babukusu society was the fact that game meat constituted vital protein, skins served both as sleeping mat and clothing. Gathering of wild fruits tubers and roots among the Babukusu was dominated by women and children. Wild berries were picked at times of food shortage to act as a hunger-breaker (Nacasio Natoka, OI, September 21, 2001). A woman who discovered a spot of edible fruits or tuber kept that knowledge to herself until the famine was over.

Among the Babukusu, there was gathering insects of the termite family. These insects locally called *chiswa* came out when it was raining or immediately after the rain. Gathering was done by children who caught them and dipped them in a calabash (*esesi*) containing water to prevent them from flying away or they could pluck their wings. Besides, termites were gathered at night when fire was lit in the open. In this case, male members of the family dug a hole near the anthill and then lit a fire in the evening adjacent to it attracting termites subsequently in the hole. Gathering or collecting of honey is also as old as the Babukusu community (Maurice Mumalasi, OI, September 2, 2001). Babukusu pioneers in their present homeland depended on wild honey, which they gathered from rocks that accommodated bees or on trees with holes. Honey was also found in underground holes or potlike structures (Jesse Mange, OI, September 13, 2001). These methods of collecting honey continued into colonial and post-colonial Babukusu society. Among the Babukusu, gathering supplemented hunting, agriculture and livestock keeping.

Crafts and Industrial Labour

In pre-colonial Africa, all societies however simple their technology were engaged in some form of manufacturing traceable to the time man first learnt to sharpen tools for cutting (Ogonda, 1990). Among the Babukusu, crafts and industries included the bee keeping industry, iron working, pottery, woodwork, basketry and weaving. Traditional crafts and industries played an important role in the pre-colonial economic structure of the Babukusu. Of importance, iron working led to the forging of hoes, axes, and machetes, valuable agricultural implements. The bee keeping industry among the Babukusu involved the making of beehives for taming bees and enable members harvest enough honey as opposed to gathering. According to oral accounts, beehives (*kimisinga*) were carved from wood. A second type of bee-hive was woven using special sticks known as *chinundu*. The outer side was smeared with cow-dung to avoid bees sneaking into the house. Honey was usually obtained from inside the house mainly at night, by opening the side that extended into the house. The bee-hive was then resealed for the bees to continue making more honey (Zachayo Mufubi, OI, September 26, 2001). Beehive making and honey harvesting were the preserve of men. Among the Babukusu, honey was consumed mainly within the household. It was boiled and stored in pots and used as relish served with the main dish. It was also added to a local brew (*kwete*) and porridge as a sweetener. Besides, honey was greatly valued as a prestigious gift especially to clan elders.

Iron Working

From an economic point of view, iron working (*bubasi*) was perhaps the most economically

important industry in pre-colonial Babukusu society. The Babukusu appear to have acquired iron technology in the course of their migration. Iron implements, specifically weapons, such as spears feature prominently in the Bakusu inter-ethnic wars with their neighbours (Esau Kisang'ani, OI, September 28, 2001). The knowledge of iron working was an exclusive preserve of men, belonging to a particular family as well as clan who monopolized the trade. This largely explains why the knowledge of *bubasi* was restricted only to specific clans or households (Charles Kisembe, OI, December 24, 2001). Knowledge of iron working was usually imparted through apprenticeship from father to son. Oral traditions however emphasize that *bubasi* was not a full-time occupational. Blacksmiths practiced other economic activities, for example farming and animal keeping and worked in their workshop (*Mwirumbi*) forging iron implements only on specific days. Iron ore was obtained from a red rock material locally known as *kamasengeli* (Pascal Kikenyi, OI, November 24, 2001). The *Kamasengeli* was subjected to high temperatures in the blacksmith's furnace. A blast of air was blown into the furnace by suing a pair of bellows or *kimikuba* producing the required temperature to smelt the iron bearing stones. Babukusu clans which had exclusive skills and expertise in black smithing forged a diversity of items from hoes to cow bells, arrows and spear heads, and curved slashers locally known as *kimihalo*. The expertise of iron working (*bubasi*) was jealously guarded.

Iron working improved hunting, warfare and security. More importantly, it provided the Babukusu with better agricultural tools. This led to increase in food output that contributed to a steady increase in population. Iron working was also significant to the blacksmith. As noted by Aseka (1989), the smith was usually one of the wealthiest individuals in the community. Iron implements were often exchanged for livestock, mainly cattle, goats and grains. In fact, iron implements were so valuable among the Babukusu during the pre-colonial period that hoes were at times accepted as part of bride price (Austen, 1987). Generally, iron working was an important socio-economic and political oriented activity among the Babukusu in the pre colonial period.

Other Traditional Crafts

The Babukusu did wood carving, pottery, basketry and weaving on part-time basis. Wood carving was the preserve of men. Wood carving was learnt through apprenticeship, and therefore was confined to certain families, handed down from father to son. They made items in response to demands of members of the society and were paid for in the form of grain and chicken. Writing about the Bantu of what was then called North Kavirondo with specific reference to the Babukusu and Abalogoli, Wagner (1970) states

that the Babukusu had the art of pottery. Wagner (ibid.) further states that both men and women did practice pottery. Men moulded bigger pots, for beer making, while women made smaller ones for cooking and storing water. Pots were often bartered for grain and poultry among the Babukusu. Weaving was the expertise dominated by men. They weaved baskets (*Bikapo*), traditional wicker doors (*lulwiki*), bee hives (*kimisinga*) granaries (*bibara*), woven plates locally known as *bitelu* and winnowing trays (*chindelu*). According to oral information, weaving was done throughout the year, but, the craft was more vigorously pursued during and after harvest (David Muraka, OI, September 21, 2001).

It was deduced from the study that men and women performed different duties apart from planting, harvesting, grazing livestock, weaving and basketry when they assisted each other. Children, on the other hand, assisted in weeding and guarding crops by scaring away birds and domestic animals and gathering fruits, vegetables and termites.

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

From the foregoing discussion, it is observable that the Babukusu were a dynamic society and their economy was highly diversified. Through the use of family labour, work parties and communal labour, a number of homesteads appropriated grains which they disposed of by buying livestock. The acquisition of iron working technology also promoted the establishment of larger farms (Simiyu Lukongo, OI, October 20, 2001). Acquiring more livestock encouraged men to enter polygamy to get more children for future labour provision. Besides, adaptation to and manipulation of the environment were important in understanding the climatic cycle and the various crops grown by the Babukusu. Generally, pre colonial Babukusu community were cultivators, animal keepers, hunters and did iron working. The Babukusu therefore practiced a mixed economy. There was division of labour along gender lines and societal needs.

It is noted in this paper that in the pre-colonial period, the Babukusu economy demonstrated qualities of diversity, dynamism, vibrancy and a sustained self regenerated growth. With material production revolving around the household and social institutions like kinship and reciprocity, the Babukusu evolved an egalitarian social structure sustained by a viable economy. This stable ordering was disturbed by intrusion of international capitalism, symbolized by British colonialism. From then, the traditional social, economic and political structures of the Babukusu were superimposed on capitalist-oriented structures and institutions. The methods, mechanism and policies that led to this situation and African responses are concerns that need to be considered.

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