

## Colonialism and the Severity of Famines and Food Shortages in Kenya: The Case of the Abagusii of Western Kenya, 1890-1919

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### **Abstract**

*Pre-colonial food shortages in Kenya, and indeed in Africa were not uncommon as their causes ranged from extreme environmental factors such as drought, inter- and intra-ethnic wars, and invasion of locusts and numerous animal, crop and human diseases. This paper sets to examine the nature of famines and food shortages in pre-colonial and early colonial Kenya. using the case of the A Bagusii before 1919. Two major famines, one in each period, are examined to show their changing patterns. It emerges in the paper that food production systems in pre-colonial Gusii land were fairly stable, diverse and efficient. Mechanisms and strategies for preventing and minimizing the occurrence of famines and food shortages including complex food production systems and elaborate social and economic relationships and institutions emerged. Other food shortage alleviation strategies identified include agricultural diversification, rotational bush fallowing, keeping of reserve food, use of bush foods, elaborate network of trade, widespread kin networks and efficient methods of food storage. However, in the colonial period the Gusii agricultural and food production systems were systematically modified, destroyed and marginalized, thus forming the basis of the severity of the earliest colonial famine in 1918/19. The introduction of new crops, land alienation, labour conscription, the depletion and neglect of the livestock industry, and the change in patterns of exchange coupled with the need to pay the colonial taxes, all rendered the Abagusii vulnerable and susceptible to the scourge of famine and food shortages only less than two decades into colonialism. Famines and food shortages became more frequent not as a result of drought but due to colonial erosion of fairly stable systems of food production and distribution among not only the Abagusii but throughout colonial and post-independent Kenya.*

### **Introduction**

Food shortages in pre-colonial Gusii land, and indeed in pre-colonial Kenya were not uncommon. Their causes ranged from extreme environmental factors such as drought, inter- and intra-ethnic wars, locust infestation and diseases. But it is also true that there existed elaborate mechanisms and strategies for preventing and minimizing the occurrence of food shortages. Food production systems were chosen within environmental limits, and complex relationships and institutions in many Kenya communities developed to minimize food shortages. Mechanisms and strategies such as agricultural diversification, rotational bush-fallowing, keeping of reserve food, use of bush foods, elaborate networks of trade, widespread kin networks,

and many others served as safeguards against famines and food shortages.

Colonial rule altered the safeguards against food shortages previously existing in Africa in general. The resulting social formations created by Africa's incorporation into the world economic system subjected its people into production of raw materials for external market. The introduction of taxes and forced labour were geared into serving foreign interests. The result was that African food production systems were modified, marginalized and to an extent, neglected and/or destroyed. The ecological balance was upset, kinship relation severed, and social obligations curtailed. Famines and food shortages became more frequent not

circumstances occurred in the form of pest damage, weeds or unanticipated poor soil performance. By having plots in different micro-environmental and micro-ecological areas farmers had the chance of spreading risks.

Animal husbandry was one of the most lucrative enterprises in pre-colonial Gusiiland. Since land was abundant, cattle used to be the main inheritable asset. The Abagusii kept cattle, sheep and goats, which supplied them with milk, blood and meat, the latter being mainly of sheep and goats. While the head of the homestead retained overall claim of ownership to the land and cattle, each wife maintained her own allocation of land and cattle (Garst, 1972:98). Cattle were the main source of prestige and power, and numbers were cherished since they indicated a man's wealth, social standing and prestige.

In the quest to protect their animals from enemies Abagusii evolved a system of building fortified villages; and for the same reason they fought their neighbouring Kipsigis in 1890 (Mwanzi, 1977:85) or 1891 Ochieng', 1974: 130) during the battle of Saosao. The importance of animals among the Abagusii can be appreciated when it is realized that they were used to pay dowry and were central to the reproduction of the community. They were also an important item of exchange both within and without. For the same reason the Abagusii medicine men were well versed with cattle diseases and their forms of treatment.

### **Methods of Ensuring Food Sufficiency**

The first and most important method was through cultivation of food. This was done at four levels. First every woman had a small garden near the homestead for the production of vegetables. This was called '*ageticha*'. Secondly, every woman had a larger plot near the homestead for the production of mainly '*wimbi*' and other crops. This was called '*enyomba*'. Thirdly far away in the field men cleared the forest and subdivided their field(s) among their wives for '*wimbi*' production; such fields were called '*endemero*'. And lastly out in the

forest, men had their own plots, called '*embonga*', whose produce was stored separately from that of his wives.

Food storage forms one of the critical steps in ensuring food sufficiency. Abundant food can be spoilt or wasted at the storage level hence, the need for efficient methods of storage. Among the Abagusii, '*wimbi*' was stored in round granaries, made of intertwined long thin sticks (well-aerated) placed about a foot from the ground and supported by stones. The granary was amply suited for keeping grain even up to ten years. Later harvests could be stored together with the earlier year's harvest taking the lowest layer without fear of the grain being spoilt. This long storage changed the '*wimbi*' colour to dark but its taste was preferred to the other grains, especially for the preparation of porridge and ugali. For immediate consumption however, some grain was threshed and stored in pots, baskets and '*emenyoncho*' - a big round-basket-like for '*wimbi*' storage devise with a narrow mouth/opening, smeared with cow-dung, and kept on the ceiling of houses - a warm area free of any insects or pests.

Except for immediate consumption or exchange purposes, sorghum heads were never threshed. The heads were often cut off and packed in the inner part of the lower roof of both houses and granaries. Equally, pest infestation and attack by animals were minimal in such places. The storage of maize was exactly the same as for sorghum. As in the Luo Kowe community, it had very limited use and was grown in small amounts. It was eaten off the cob, either boiled or roasted (Hay, 1978:96). Sweet potatoes, on the other hand, presented no storage problem as they were dug up only when required for immediate cooking.

Protection of crops from bowling insects and animals, both in the farm and in the granary, appears to have been negligible. No form of medicinal plants or ash were used against them. Rats, on the other hand, were not much of a menace and, as one

informant put it, there was abundant food both inside and outside the granary so that the damage to stored food was negligible (Ondonga, O.I., 1989). The basis of continued food supplies lay in the manner of storage and continued cultivation of surplus food.

Other methods of ensuring food sufficiency included the planting of more sweet potatoes and pumpkins during periods of locust's invasion. As already mentioned, there used to be a field for the husband, the harvest of which was stored separately in a granary called '*emonga yo'mogaka*'. This literary means 'the fathers bank or security'. The produce in the man's granary, unlike the woman's which was used in feeding the household, was never used except in periods of food shortage. When there was no food shortage the man exchanged his produce for livestock or for his sons' bride-wealth. It appears that the Abagusii did not receive food from their neighbours except in times of ecological disaster. The exception to this was milk, which was acquired from the Luo as part of the perennial exchange between the two communities. The Abagusii proudly claim that they, unlike the Luo, Maasai or Kipsigis, never sold or pawned their children to neighbouring ethnic groups in exchange for food. However, Ochieng' (1975b: 67) has tried to refute this, saying that the Abagusii do not give such information due to 'ethnic pride'. According to oral sources however, most of the Gusii community is said to have been unaware of such transactions. Mwanzi (1977:85) attests to the limited exchange of children from the Abagusii to the Kipsigis

Within Gusiiland, food shortages were common in individual households, and so complex kinship relations developed to alleviate food shortages in such household. First, such affected household sold their animals for '*wimbi*' to those who had a surplus; secondly, they could beg for food; thirdly, if the affected household had an eligible marriageable daughter, they requested bride price in form of '*wimbi*' calculated at the exchange rate of heifers.

Fourthly, the affected family could be given a long-term loan in food, equivalent to a heifer and payable when a particular girl in the family got married and dowry was paid. Equally, the affected family could be given a heifer to be exchanged for '*wimbi*' elsewhere, payable when the same girl got married (Machani, O.I., 1989).

Lastly, all members of a household could move from a hunger - stricken area to join relatives who would give them food and a piece of land to cultivate. In such circumstances they sometimes ended up staying there permanently on their own will. The affected families sometimes received a lot of help from those with surplus food. Other than giving donations the latter could exchange food for animals from the affected homes, or give food loans in form of '*of'wimbi*' or livestock.

While it is therefore evident that the pre-colonial Abagusii experienced food shortages due to weather as well as warfare and other forms of social disruption, it is also evident that, as Zeleza (1986:159) puts it in a wider context, there existed a variety of social mechanisms and ecological reserves to reduce the impact of food shortages in anyone family. The organization of the extended homestead both as a production and consumption unit, reduced the vulnerability of individuals and component nuclear family units. Patterns of re-distributive and reciprocal gifts between households in turn reinforced the society's ability to withstand a crisis of food shortage. This was coupled with elaborate techniques of storage that permitted grain to be stored for relatively long periods. Against this background, it is worth examining the famine of 1891 among the Abagusii,

### **The Famine of Nyamakongiro**

According to Ochieng' (1975b:66), the years between 1885 and 1892 saw a series of bitter famines in Gusiiland. One of those remembered, Nyamakongiro, occurred at this time and one informant dated it to around 1891 (Onchoke O.I., 1989). This

period of disaster does not appear to have been unique to the Abagusii, but was widespread in the east African region. Mwanzi (1977:84) dates the period in the case of the Kipsigis to 1890. Similar disasters have been reported among the pastorals Maasai (see Jacobs, 1965:96-99) and Kjekshus (1977: 126-142) reported about the great rinderpest of the 1890's in many parts of Tanganyika. According to Mwanzi (1977:130), between 1889 and 1892 a cattle disease which the Abagusii refer to as 'Ongonga' (sic) swept the Luo, Abagusii and Kipsigis country killing thousands of cattle. One informant saw this disease as having been the cause of the 1891 famine (Ochoke, O.I., 1989). According to him, a bull brought from Luo land transmitted a serious disease locally called 'Onkongga', which killed so many animals that payment of bride wealth dropped from between about ten to fourteen head of cattle to just one cow. Some people even gave goats as dowry. Apparently due to drought and deaths of many animals the Abagusii started using '*amakongiro*' a local drought resistant creeping weed, as a relish and supplement to milk. According to Ochieng' (1974b:66-67) they also turned to the Luo for help in grain, milk and potatoes especially the Abagusii of Wanjare and South Mugirango.

The situation was compounded by the Kipsigis attack and the battle of Saosao. During the disaster of 1889-1892, when cattle disease decimated Kipsigis herds, the latter organized raiding expeditions to Gusiiland and Luoland (see Mwanzi, 1977:85). One such raid took place in 1890 (Ibid) or 1891 (Ochieng', 1974b: 130). Abagusii traditions do mention the raid as having been one of the causes of the famine of *Nyamakongiro*. The raiders, who consisted of men and boys, successfully marched from North Mugirango and ended at Manga, destroying many Abagusii villages and capturing a great quantity of food and livestock. Organized parties of Kipsigis warriors, women and children repatriated such booty back home as the rest of the soldiers proceeded. From Manga, the raiders proceeded to Luo land where they

were repulsed back and ambushed by the Abagusii who killed them to a man at the Charachani River.

Many Abagusii attribute the cause of the famine to the above two reasons. Oncboke (I.O., 1989) 1, one such person, asserted that '*amakongiro*' were eaten to supplement milk which was scarce. He therefore refutes drought to have been a cause. Such people argue that rain failure was very rare in Gusiiland given the role played by women and the rainmaker. Hence the famine of *Nyamakongiro*, according to them, was caused by a cattle disease which decimated their livestock and the raid from the Kipsigis which depleted their food reserves and animals as well.

### **Colonialism and the Destruction of Gusii Economy**

The establishment of colonial rule in Gusiiland set in motion an accumulation of debilitating events, which culminated in the 1918-19 Kengere famine. Most notable of these events was the near depletion of the Abagusii stock; the emphasis of maize production to replace '*wimbi*. the demand for labour and the associated hut and poll taxes. Livestock herding was one sector of the Abagusii economy that was immediately affected by the imposition of colonial rule. In September 1905, 400 head of cattle were confiscated in a punitive expedition. The Abagusii ambushed the patrol and killed a sergeant; 400 more head of cattle were taken in retaliation (Gordon, 1946:34} Surprisingly enough expeditions were also sent to areas which had supposedly signed "peace treaties" with the British. The object of such expeditions was to force the Abagusii into the money economy or provide their labour. Indeed those who were engaged in leveling roads near Kisii '*boma*' were paid in cows . The Abagusii also sold some of their animals in order to get money to pay taxes "By 1909 there was a large trade in cattle, with many hundreds having been sold by the Abagusii in order to acquire rupees for the payment of tax " (KNA/DC/KSI/1/1/1909).

Cattle were also used in paying fines and settling disputes and they were confiscated from homes of tax defaulters, labour deserters and as a form of punishment (Machani, 0.1., 1989). Similarly, they were taken for crimes committed individually or collectively, However, given the importance of cattle to the Abagusii as earlier mentioned, some people invested their savings in cattle by either offering their labour or engaging in petty commodity production.

In crop production, the prime aim was to replace 'wimbi' production with maize because it was saleable and in demand by the settlers who wanted to feed their labour. According to Wolff (1974:71) one of the imperial goals in the protectorate included "producing those commodities whose availability for import into Britain would lessen or remove what the British businessmen and authorities deemed a dangerous dependence of foreign sources of supply". 'Wimbi' was not such crop, and there was an element of administrative propaganda against the crop as is conveyed by the Kisii District Commissioner (DC), who in 1908 asserted that 'wimbi' was "a poor and unsatisfactory crop" which he hoped to replace with 'a good class of maize' (KNAfDC/1/21 11 908). Many other crops were introduced as part of the "immediate goal of finding exportables to relieve the British treasury of the financial burden imposed by the protectorate in its early years" (Wolff, 1974:71). These included groundnuts, simsim, beans wheat and Irish potatoes.

Labour extraction was of prime importance if the labour demand by settlers had to be met. The Africans, according to Brett (1973:167), had to be made to enter the world of money as wage labourers rather than independent producers, for as long as the peasant had an independent control over

the means of production through his control over his own land, the African peasant would not be forced to work for the settler but would continue to produce on his own account. Consequently hut and poll taxes were introduced and the Africans were forbidden to grow profitable crops. Through legislation Africans were forced to turn out to work for European settlers.

In Gusiiland like elsewhere in Kenya, labour was forced out by chiefs and headmen, sometimes under harsh conditions. Ironically it is the young energetic men who were seized, leaving behind the old, children and women. Agricultural production was therefore hampered.

### **World War I and the Famine of 1919**

The debilitating economic condition laid down before the war were amplified during the war. Other than being sent for 'outside work' for their rebellious conduct in 1914, more Abagusii labour was needed in the war against the Germans as Carries Corps (C.C.). In the two years 1914~1916, a total of 21, 864 men were sent out to work within a period of 18 months ~ an average of 1,215 men per month for 18 consecutive months (KNA/DC/KSI/1/2/1916. Table 1 below shows the number involved in the war in relation to other types of labour. In all, a total of 42,990 people were recruited for labour between 1914 and 1918 from the district. Of course, it was not possible to mobilize all that labour without coercion. Consequently, the district witnessed the worst forms of forced conscription never before known. Youths were rounded up during sports meetings, which were now frequent. Others were taken from their huts at night. The chiefs and headmen used all manner of force to produce the required labour under strict orders from the DC.

Table 1: Labour recruitment during World War I

Year	Carries Corp labour	Other labour	Total
1914/15	8915	5,055	13,972
1915/16	6,822	1,070	7,892
1916/17	9,558	1,658	11,216
1917/18	8,758	1,052	9,810

Source: KNA/DC/KSI/1/2, 1914-18.

The effects of such large numbers of able-bodied men being uprooted from their barnes were soon evident. After suffering in the war, they returned to face the famine and pestilence of ] 9] 8-19. The war years were ones of gloom and depression, partly because of the general upset of markets and partly due to the shortage of able-bodied labour. The land under cultivation decreased. Simsim production came to naught due to the closing of markets in 1914-15

.(KNA/DC/1/2/1915), and wheat was not produced owing to the disturbed state of affairs among the Abagusii. There was need for the Abagusii to grow maize, but the result of the distribution of a ton of seed. for planting was disappointing, although the effort was to encourage the planting of at least a quarter acre for every hut (Gordon, 1946:43) the dearth of labour rendered the scheme impracticable.

As a result of war, trade was upset and restricted. The Abagusii were impoverished, poor and hungry and agricultural produce fetched less money than in the pre-war years. The price of cattle equally dropped. The prices of imported goods rose steadily and, to make matters worse, taxes were raised during the war. Because the purchasing power of the Abagusii fell, 75% of the Indian shops had to close down temporarily. Trade in foodstuffs ceased almost entirely. Only a few Abagusii could afford to pay 4 rupees for a blanket,

which before the war had cost less than 1 rupee (Gordon. 1946:43). The sale of bicycles, which had been stepped up before the war, dropped drastically.

A large number of animals were confiscated on various pretexts. Many informants attested to the fact that a lot of cattle were lost during the war. 3,000 heads of cattle were sized as punishment during the 1914 revolt. In 1916/17 year alone the DC, Hemmant, estimated that 5,200 head of cattle and 1,200 sheep and goats were sold out of the district (KNA/DC/KSI/1/2/1917). No figures are available for those sold within the district, yet there was a large number of soldiers and carrier corps in the district to be fed mainly on local beef. Equally, there were frequent outbreaks of rinderpest. Only a precipitant like drought was required to almost deplete livestock both as a source of food and in exchange for food.

The number of animals sold during the war shows the amount of pressure put on the Abagusii by taxes. Hut tax figures show a steady increase before, during and after the war (see Table 2 below). Both hut and poll taxes, which stood at 3 rupees before the war, were hiked to 5 rupees in 1915 - an increase of 66.6%. In view of the fact that the markets for cash crops were interrupted with at this time. the obvious inference is that money for paying taxes was acquired through the sale of livestock and from Jabour earnings.

Table 2 Hut Tax Payment in Kisli Per Location (in Rupees)

Location	1912/1 3	1913/1 4	1914/1 5	1915/1 6	1916/17	1991711 8	1919/20	1920/21
Wanjare	9117	9660	10374	10800	18460	18365	21870	33728
Nyaribari	4833	5016	5697	6072	10075	10315	12370	•
Mugusero	2223	2634	2793	2997	5045	5070	5935	9096
S. Mogirango	6762	6945	7674	7884	14050	14265	15970	26208
N. Mogirango	9270	11502	12393	13689	24085	24690	28005	46408
Kitntu	21720	22941	24669	26961	45335	45635	53670	83664
Machoge	6135	6459	7173	7800	13785	13930	16090	26160
Bassi	4875	5085	5715	6636	11095	10745	13005	21136
Total	64,935	70,242	76,488	82,839	141,930	143,015	166,915	266,960

Source: KNAIDC/KAUI/ Various years.

According to Ochieng' (1986:8), "in Kenya, as in many parts of Africa, droughts have always acted as catalytic precipitants of famines, while the real cause of famines lie hidden in mistaken human policies and environmental deterioration". We have already seen how colonialism, through its economic and labour policies, compounded by the war, created a crisis in Gusi peasant agriculture, making food supply so meager and easily liable to be blown out of proportion by drought.

Famine and pestilence followed hard on the heels of the war. The 1918/19 famine, locally known as the famine of '*Kengere*' apparently after the many towering church bells in the area, and possibly due to the mission's role in distributing famine relief, was also precipitated by an anti-colonial movement among the Abagusii - known as the Mumbo cult. Ogot and Ochieng' (1972: 149-171) have shown that the Abagusii adopted the cult of Mumbo from the Luo and used it effectively to continue their struggle against the British up to 1954. According to the teachings of the Mumbo cult, the white man was destined to go and the Abagusii be left alone. In addition to this, Sakawa, the renowned prophet among the Abagusii, had prophesied that one day the white man would go back to his country. It was this Mumbo cult that was behind the 1914 revolt. "The year 1917 is traditionally remembered by the Abagusii as 'the year of prophets'" (Ogot and Ochieng', 1972:169). In this year, a great many *mumbo* prophets rose to tell their credulous compatriots to keep their hoes indoors since '*wimbi*' could come by itself and fill their pots and granaries. The days of the Europeans were said to be numbered, and taxes and other "burdensome jobs" could disappear with them.

They promised people food and told them not to cultivate. With no crops in the field, no food in the granary, and the failure of rainfall in 1918 the Gusi suffered the worst famine remembered to date. According to one informant the Mumboites were to blame.

By 1917, there were Mumboites like Obino, Intware, Nyakundi and Ogowora and his wife. They said that ... food and cows without horns (*Nyamogumo*) will come from the river/lake. 'Leave your hoes put them in the house and *wimbi* will come. We did as the Mumboites said. "Where then is the food? Ho! By the time we started cultivating in 1918 ... famine was sweeping across the country. The Mumboites are the ones who deceived people that food would come" (Onchoke, 0.1.,1989).

### Conclusion

The drought and "Mumboism" clearly demonstrate the inherent weakness in food supply laid down by colonial capitalism in Gusiiland. The famine of 1918/19 illustrates how the Gusi pre-capitalists economy had been systematically destroyed. Gusi granaries that stored food for a hungry day were destroyed by the monetization of the economy. The surplus food that had been stored as security against famine was now being sold to acquire tax money. The conscription of labour meant less food production. Maize could not be stored as long as '*wimbi*', and yet it had virtually replaced '*wimbi*' as the staple food crop. The need for maize essentially destroyed the pre-capitalist agricultural economy of the Abagusii to their detriment. In other words, the 1918/19 famine is testimony of the extent to which colonial capitalism had underdeveloped the Gusi economy destroying the various social and economic mechanisms and strategies, as well as ecological reserves (including forests formerly meant to reduce the impact of food shortages. It is therefore incorrect to cite drought and Mumboism as the only causes of the '*Kenger'e*' famine. In any case the mumbo cult's emergence had been prompted by the need to resist and reverse the colonial order.

The adverse consequences of the colonial system went further. Having been hit hard by the famine, the Abagusii became more

prone to the influenza epidemic that swept through the reserve, "disorganizing everything and causing the death of some five thousand natives" (*KNA/DC/KSI/1//2/1919*). The same year, 1919, is remembered among the Abagusii as the year of a strange disease which ate the private parts of the people (or the year of *amaikanse*). Apparently the returning porters and carries corps brought the disease. In the words of the Medical Officer of Kisumu; ••... now with the conclusion of hostilities many thousands of porters have carrier the infection into districts previously health" (see van Zwanenberg, 1974: 109).

It is therefore imperative to re-examine colonial famines and other such calamities in the light of the contradictions inherent in the capitalist system and absolve the weather which according to Ochieng' (1986) only acts as "a catalytic precipitant". This distortion was further entrenched throughout the colonial period and continued into independent Kenya. A legacy of food shortages and severe famines was already laid coupled with population explosion, periodically sweeps through the country to date.

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