Agrarian Change and Indigenous Food Production: A Historical Study of the Abagusii, 1955–1970

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to examine how agrarian change influenced the decline of indigenous food production among the Abagusii community of western Kenya between 1955 and 1970. Before this period, the Abagusii relied on communal land ownership, indigenous seed systems and indigenous cropping methods that sustained food security and reinforced cultural values. However, land reforms such as the Swynnerton Plan, introduction of exotic livestock and post-independence agricultural policies shifted emphasis toward commercial crop production. As families increasingly planted cash crops such as tea, coffee and pyrethrum and adopted grade cattle, indigenous crops such as millet, sorghum and indigenous legumes gradually declined. Migration to estates and urban centres in search of income further removed labour from rural farms and encouraged reliance on purchased food. Education policies and youth agricultural programs, including 4-K Clubs, promoted modern farming practices and high-value crops, shaping a generation that associated progress with commercial agriculture rather than indigenous food production. Grounded in modernisation theory, this study explores how shifts in Kenya's agrarian structure have shaped patterns of indigenous food production. This study adopted a historical research design, utilizing purposive and snowball sampling to identify knowledgeable informants in Gusiiland in regard to indigenous food production. Findings indicate that agrarian modernisation created economic opportunities but weakened indigenous production. The study concludes that agrarian change led to growing demand of western education, rural to rural and rural to urban migration which led to the decline indigenous food production. The study recommends that agricultural policies should integrate modern agriculture with indigenous food production through culturally sensitive and community-based approaches to achieve sustainable food production practices.

Keywords: Agrarian Change, Gusiiland, Land Tenure, Social-Economic Changes, Swynnerton Plan.

INTRODUCTION

The argument of this study is that agrarian change shapes the stability of indigenous food production in African rural communities where farming knowledge forms part of cultural identity and household sustenance. Indigenous food production carry practices of seed selection, soil care and seasonal knowledge built through generations and these traditions support both nutrition and social continuity. Current shifts in land use, climate stress and agricultural policy influence how these systems operate and affect access to diverse local foods. Atukunda et al. (2021) report that rising hunger across Africa reflects pressures on local production networks and limited support for small-scale farmers. Otekunrin (2021) notes a steady increase in undernourished populations in the region, which calls attention to the changing conditions under which rural households produce and access food. Hiywotu (2025) highlights the value of sustainable, locally grounded agricultural practices and emphasises the role of ecological knowledge, seed diversity and farmer-driven innovation in advancing food security. Indigenous farming practices therefore represent both a livelihood foundation and a cultural resource, guiding seed preservation, communal labour and shared responsibility for land. When agrarian transitions weaken these systems, food availability, cultural practices and knowledge transmission come under strain, making the study of local food production essential for sustainable development.

The evidence of this study indicate that agrarian change has reshaped indigenous food production systems in significant ways. Rural communities in Africa have long relied on land-based livelihoods rooted in communal

access, seed conservation and seasonal farming knowledge that ensured household nutrition and ecological balance. Bryceson (2005) explains that rural livelihoods are moving away from exclusive reliance on farming as households turn to wage labour, trade and migration. This shift affects the time, labour and cultural attention once devoted to indigenous crops such as sorghum, millet and legumes, which sustained diets and soil health. Mafeje (2003) notes that communal land systems protected cultivation traditions and seed exchange networks, yet market-oriented reforms and individualised land access have weakened indigenous food production. Cousins (2015) further observes that modern agricultural policy often prioritises commercial production, leaving limited institutional support for small-scale, culturally rooted farming. These changes influence food availability, seed diversity and the passing of knowledge between generations. Understanding these shifts is key in examining how livelihood transitions continue to affect indigenous food production and long-term food sovereignty.

While Kenya's agrarian reforms strengthened commercial agriculture and expanded rural market participation, their effects on indigenous food production have not been sufficiently examined. After independence, national policy promoted cash-crop farming as a strategy for rural income growth and economic stability (Berry,1984). Reforms such as the Swynnerton Plan supported individual land tenure, farm consolidation and the introduction of high-value crops in place of diverse subsistence systems (Amatsimbi, 2024). This restructuring prioritised crops such as maize, coffee and tea while gradually sidelining indigenous staples. In western Kenya, rising population density, limited arable land and expanding market pressures accelerated the shift from shifting cultivation to permanent agriculture, reducing crop variation and straining soil resources. Farmers confronted declining fertility, striga infestation, and costly inputs, making dependence on maize increasingly unsustainable. Even so, households continued to cultivate cassava, sorghum, millet, and sweet potatoes often in homestead gardens because these crops ensured resilience during scarcity and preserved culturally valued food systems (Eisemon & Nyamete, 1988). Thus, despite agrarian modernisation efforts, indigenous food crops endured as practical and cultural strategies for household sustenance within a changing rural economy.

Agrarian change in Gusiiland reoriented food systems by restructuring land use, labour patterns and production priorities. Before colonial rule, households cultivated millet, sorghum, bananas, beans and root crops through intercropping within communal tenure frameworks that sustained soil fertility and ensured food availability (Omwoyo, 2015). Colonial agricultural policy redirected land and labour toward maize, tea and coffee, embedding market-oriented farming and reducing acreage under indigenous staples (Omwoyo, 1990). Labour migration to settler estates intensified women's agricultural responsibilities, narrowing household capacity for subsistence production and reinforcing gendered labour divisions (Motanya, 2019). Land consolidation under the Swynnerton Plan strengthened individual tenure and encouraged cash-crop investment, which increased household exposure to market instability and constrained indigenous food systems (Omwoyo, 1990). Over time, hybrid maize displaced indigenous cereals, reshaping diets and creating reliance on externally regulated grain markets (Motanya, 2019). Although commercial production created income opportunities, gains were uneven: households with land, credit and off-farm income adapted advantageously, while resource-poor families experienced heightened food insecurity and limited productive options (Orvis, 1989). Agrarian change thus deepened socio-economic differentiation, altered food autonomy and redefined rural labour structures.

Statement of the Problem

Food production among the Abagusii was grounded in cultural meaning, communal land stewardship and household organization. These farming practices supported subsistence, strengthened social bonds and preserved indigenous food production practices. Agrarian revolution introduced new production imperatives that introduced land tenure reforms and the expansion of commercial agriculture. These interventions altered cultivation patterns, influenced land allocation priorities and reshaped labour responsibilities within households. As farmers embraced profitable agriculture and navigated emerging agricultural institutions, shifts occurred in household resource use, gendered labour roles and patterns of food production. These changes unfolded alongside demographic pressure, evolving market structures and administrative directives that guided food production practices in Gusiiland. The resulting agrarian environment generated conditions in which indigenous food production encountered pressures, leading to alterations in crop and livestock production. Despite the centrality of indigenous food production to cultural continuity, scholarly attention on the socio-economic influence of Kenya's agrarian change on indigenous food production in the period 1955-1970 remains scanty. Therefore, this study was timely.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Modernisation Theory, initially articulated by Walt Whitman Rostow in the early 1960s, who viewed development as a gradual movement from subsistence-based structures towards organised and commercially oriented systems supported by modern institutions (Rostow, 1960). The theory holds that changes in agriculture, education, technology and administrative organisation stimulate shifts in production patterns, labour roles and household livelihoods. Its key tenets include the importance of technological improvement, structured agricultural support, market expansion, land reform and the strengthening of state institutions to advance rural productivity and social transformation (Smith, 1974). Rostow's model outlines progressive stages of development, where farming communities adopt new farming methods, production objectives broaden beyond subsistence and social life adjusts to new economic priorities. Although scholars have observed that the theory places considerable emphasis on externally driven change and may overlook the resilience and creativity within indigenous systems (Frank, 1966), it continues to offer a useful interpretive framework for understanding state-led agrarian initiatives and emerging rural economies. In the context of Gusiiland, the theory assists in explaining how the Swynnerton plan, migration pattens and western education influenced indigenous food production during Kenya's agrarian change. Through this perspective, agrarian change among the Abagusii is understood as a process shaped by policy direction, modern farming ideals and evolving socio-economic conditions that altered indigenous food production practices in the period 1955-1970.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a historical research design to trace and interpret developments, cultural patterns, and socio-economic practices, providing a clear understanding of changes in indigenous food production among the Abagusii between 1955 and 1970. Historical research, as noted by Porra et al. (2014), involves the systematic and impartial gathering, evaluation and synthesis of evidence to reconstruct past events and derive informed conclusions. The design enabled an examination of the socio-economic influence of Kenya's agrarian change on indigenous food practices and rural livelihoods within Abagusii community in the period 1955-1970. The researcher utilised both primary and secondary sources to analyse how land reforms, agricultural extension services, market-oriented farming initiatives and shifting production priorities shaped indigenous food systems in Gusiiland. Oral interviews were conducted with individuals drawn from Kisii and Nyamira Counties due to their historical significance in agricultural development initiatives in the region. These participants were selected based on their knowledge of socio-economic changes that influenced indigenous food production during the study period. Informants comprised elders, farmers, retired agricultural officers, custodians of Gusii Oral history on the agrarian changes. Purposive sampling complemented by snowball techniques was employed resulting in a final sample of 38 informants. Secondary data was sourced from books, journals, newspapers, periodicals, theses and dissertations relevant to social economic influence on indigenous food production occasioned by agrarian change. The collected data was sorted, transcribed, organised into themes and presented through descriptive narration supported by direct quotations to attain historical accuracy. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from participants, assuring them of confidentiality and responsible use of information. The study received ethics approval from the university and research authorisation from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The Swynnerton Plan and Its Influence on Indigenous Food Production in Kenya, 1955–1962

The Swynnerton Plan of 1954 was established to restructure African land tenure and promote commercial agriculture by consolidating small plots and introducing individual land titles. It sought to create stable, productive holdings and integrate African farmers into a market-based agricultural system supported by secure tenure and access to credit. As Kungu, Chacha and Gichobi (2022) note, the policy aimed to strengthen rural livelihoods by formalizing land ownership and encouraging intensified production. However, implementation largely favoured male household heads, replacing communal tenure and weakening customary user rights. In Gusii land, where women traditionally accessed and cultivated land within homesteads, this shift transferred authority to men through registered titles. Onyambu (2023) observes that the policy reduced women's land

access and influence over agricultural decisions, reinforcing patriarchal control and affecting their economic stability. One participant explained:

land was allocated by the male head of the family and a larger portion was put under cash production. The wife or wives were required to help cultivate the land and harvest produce for cooperative society to earn capital in acquiring money for paying taxes and personal development (Onindo, O.I., 21/10/2024).

The findings above imply that land control increasingly rested with male household heads, while women's contribution remained largely confined to agricultural labour. Their work sustained cash-crop cultivation for cooperative sale, enabling men to raise revenue for tax obligations and personal advancement thus contributing to a decline in indigenous food production. Archival evidence show that in Kisii District land consolidation did not unfold as intended instead, holdings were subdivided into smaller plots, with colonial agricultural officers directing farmers towards commercially profitable food production, resulting in seven hundred and twenty such plots by 1958 (KNA/DC/KSI/1/20). Similarly, a key informant recalled that diminishing land access compelled young men to seek wage employment on tea estates to support their households, with monthly earnings directed towards basic family needs and limited indigenous food production (Omweri, O.I., 23/10/2024). This demonstrates that inadequate land for subsistence cultivation and limited capital for household upkeep pushed individuals into wage labour on white settler farms, thereby reducing indigenous food production.

Food Crop Production, 1955-1962

According to Garst (1972), between 1955 and 1961 maize production expanded significantly, whereas finger millet remained largely stagnant. Improvements in agricultural practices, including the introduction of hybrid seed varieties in 1959, enhanced cultivation methods and contributed to substantial increases in maize yields. Despite a reduction in its price per bag, maize remained economically advantageous, as its aggregate value per acre increased substantially. By contrast, finger millet registered no notable improvement in yield and its value per acre declined over the same period. This pattern is illustrated in Table 1.0 below:

Table 1.0 Maize and Finger Millet Yields, Prices, and Value per Acre, 1955–1961

Food Crops	Yield Per Acre (Bag)		Price Per bag Kshs.		Value per Acre	
Year (s)	1955	1961	1955	1961	1955	1961
Maize	6	9	25/80	22/30	154.80	200.70
Finger millet	4	4	30/80	27/75	122.00	91.00

Note. Prices converted from fractions to decimals for consistency. Kshs = Kenyan Shillings.

Source: KNA/DC/KSI/1/17 & 23, 1955 & 1961

As demonstrated in the table 1.0 abover, maize became more productive and profitable between 1955 and 1961, with yields rising from six to nine bags per acre and value increasing from Kshs 154.80 to Kshs 200.70 despite a slight price drop. By contrast, finger millet yields remained unchanged at four bags per acre, and its value per acre declined from Kshs 122.00 to Kshs 91.00, indicating a clear shift towards maize cultivation during this period. Colonial chiefs worked closely with agricultural officers to advance maize cultivation and encourage higher output among local farmers. Omanga, narrated:

I served as the colonial chief for Bomachoge between 1959 and 1962. Upon assuming office, I pledged that my people would no longer experience food shortages. I travelled to Kisii town to consult colonial agricultural officers on effective methods for improving maize yields. They advised that planting in straight rows and using fertilizer was essential. After returning, I convened a baraza where agricultural officers trained farmers on proper planting techniques. I supervised the implementation of these methods alongside the officers, ensuring farmers received hands-on instruction on fertilizer application and row planting. That season, maize harvests exceeded

expectations; granaries were filled and surplus maize was stored in granaries. My people wer impressed and gave me the name *Nyancherere*, meaning 'straight line,' in reference to the planting method I championed (Elijah Omanga, 30/10/2024).

This account shows that the introduction of colonial farming methods shifted local priorities toward maize at the expense of indigenous food crops. By enforcing straight-row planting and fertilizer use, the chief encouraged farmers to devote more land and labour to maize. As maize became the preferred crop linked to modern farming and food security, indigenous staples such as millet, sorghum and indigenous root crops were gradually neglected. Over time, this reduced the cultivation of indigenous foods and contributed to the decline of indigenous food production in Gusiiland. Similarly in an oral interview with Kinaaro she observed that Poor returns from cash crops like pyrethrum, mainly due to low cooperative prices, led farmers to abandon its cultivation and turn to maize (Jerusha Kinaaro O.I.,13/10/2024). By 1962, pyrethrum production had fallen sharply as farmers chose maize for its more reliable income and food supply. Motanya (2019) concurs with this view noting that colonial taxation placed heavy financial demands on the Abagusii, leading them to rely on maize both as their main staple and as a crop that could generate the cash needed to meet tax obligations. In support, Onyambu et al., (2023) observes that the Abagusii had embraced *enchoro*, maize which they termed sweeter than the indigenous finger millet.

Cattle Production, 1955-1962

Orvis (1989) argues that land tenure reforms under the Swynnerton Plan reshaped cattle keeping by changing land use and management. In Kisii District, high population pressure led to extensive land subdivision, reducing grazing areas and affecting livestock practices. Archival records show that by 1955, colonial veterinary officers described cattle husbandry as "extremely low," noting persistent tick infestations that limited productivity (KNA/DC/KSI/1/17/1955).

In 1956, the colonial government sought to improve livestock productivity by introducing Sahiwal cattle in the region. Through the Kisii Livestock Breeding Centre, three-quarter-bred Sahiwal bulls were supplied to promote selective breeding and raise milk output. However, these crossbreeds were vulnerable to local diseases and required intensive veterinary care, which hindered their broad adoption (Omwoyo, 1990). The initiative mainly benefited wealthier households that could meet the management requirements, including fencing and proper upkeep of the bulls. As a result, most small-scale farmers were unable to participate and continued keeping indigenous cattle varieties. Oreti narrated:

the price of improved cattle breeds was beyond the reach of most households due to widespread poverty. Farmers who acquired these breeds needed licences and frequent supervision from veterinary officers, further limiting accessibility. Consequently, many smallholders continued keeping indigenous cattle, which were easier to manage and better adapted to local conditions (Margret Oreti O.I.,6/10/2024).

From the above findings, we can deduce that the introduction of improved cattle breeds did not benefit all farmers equally. High purchase costs and regulatory requirements restricted access to wealthier households, while poorer farmers were unable to participate in the programme. This created a situation where livestock improvement efforts deepened socio-economic disparities, as most smallholders continued keeping indigenous cattle due to their affordability and adaptability. Consequently, indigenous breeds remained central to peasant livelihoods, providing food security. Garst (1972) explains that efforts to introduce grade cattle in Kisii District began in 1961, with six graded cattle placed on two farms. By the next year, 68 farmers kept eighty-nine graded cattle. To regulate the programme, the Gusii County Council set clear requirements. Each farmer had to provide at least two acres of fenced pasture planted with Kikuyu or Star grass and reserve a quarter acre for fodder crops. They also needed to build essential structures such as a milking shed and calf pen and maintain a reliable water supply. Before receiving grade cattle, local stock had to be sprayed for six months to eliminate ticks. Farmers were further required to attend training at the Farmer Training Centre to develop skills for managing the improved breeds. Atuya stated:

I exchanged my eighteen local cattle for a single grade cow. It turned out to be very demanding to keep. The animal needed constant protection from ticks and regular spraying with costly chemicals. In the end, it died

because I could not manage those strict care requirements. I went back to keeping the few indigenous cattle that remained and continued planting maize. After that loss, I decided not to invest in grade cattle again because they required more attention and resources than I could provide (Richard Atuya O.I.,29/10/2024).

From the foregoing, it becomes evident that the push to introduce grade cattle placed considerable strain on households with limited means. Many farmers were unable to sustain the financial and management demands associated with exotic breeds, resulting in losses and eventual abandonment of the programme by some farmers. In turn, this experience reinforced reliance on indigenous zebu cattle which were better suited to local conditions, cheaper to maintain and more resilient to disease. Consequently, indigenous breeds continued to anchor livestock production and household subsistence among small farmers, despite colonial pressures to adopt improved stock.

Kenya's Independence and Indigenous Food Production Upto 1970

Kenya's independence in 1963, under the leadership of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, ushered in a new policy direction that prioritized agricultural development. In 1964, the government launched its first Five-Year Development Plan aimed at stabilizing the national economy, reflecting the recognition that agriculture formed the backbone of Kenya's economic structure and played a critical role in driving GDP growth (Republic of Kenya,1964). According to Lofchie (1986), the early post-independence period witnessed notable growth in agricultural output, which contributed significantly to foreign exchange earnings through export trade.

Motanya (2019) notes that in Gusiiland, considerable effort was directed toward building cooperative societies to boost the production of coffee, pyrethrum and tea. These cooperatives were expected to train farmers, provide essential inputs and oversee the processing and marketing of produce. Nyanaro recalled:

At that time, many households focused on cash crops because they offered better returns than food crops. In our home, we planted pyrethrum and delivered it to the cooperative for sale. The money we earned helped us meet family needs and manage household expenses. Most of the land was devoted to these income-generating crops, while only a small area was left for growing indigenous food production (Ebisiba Nyanaro O.I.,13/10/2024).

From the above account, it can be inferred that the expansion of cash-crop agriculture in Gusiiland redirected land, labour and household priorities toward market-oriented production. Oreti added that farmers who cultivated cash crops such as coffee and pyrethrum joined cooperative societies, which enabled them to access loans for purchasing graded cattle. The improved breeds produced more milk, which farmers sold through unions, increasing their income (Margret Oreti O.I.,6/10/2024).. As a result, many gradually abandoned indigenous Zebu cattle in favour of higher-yielding breeds promoted by the Department of Agriculture. Osoro noted that from 1963 to 1970, the post-independence government through the Department of Agriculture, placed strong emphasis on commercial crop production and improved livestock rearing (Alphanus Osoro O.I.,29/10/2024). In light of this, the present study investigates how the pursuit of profitable agriculture, together with rural-to-urban migration and the spread of Western education, contributed to the decline of indigenous food-production.

Post-Independence Migration Pattens and Indigenous Food Production, 1963-1970

After independence the government promoted settlement schemes to support large-scale farming. Groups of people combined resources to buy land, which was later shared among them. In the Kisii District, these settlements were established in Borabu (now part of Nyamira County), where families planted pyrethrum and tea for income and maize for household use (Richard Atuya O.I.,8/10/2024). Indigenous crops were still grown, but only on small plots since most land was set aside for cash crops. Onyancha also mentioned that his father kept graded cattle for milk and hired casual workers to help on the farm. Similarly, Omwoyo recalled that influential leaders such as Lawrence Sagini, Andrew John Omanga, and James Nyamweya, who were close to the government, had a major role in these schemes. He added that many people from Kisii moved within the district to work on large farms owned by wealthy farmers, which drew labour away from indigenous food production (Japhet Omwoyo O.I.,18/10/2024). Maxon (2003) also notes that the settlement schemes aimed to promote profitable crops and improved livestock as a way to raise living standards.

The land settlement schemes did not adequately resolve landlessness among the Abagusii. Washington Ondicho of the Agricultural Development Corporation (ADC) observed in a petition that much of the settlement land had been directed to the Kericho reserve, raising concerns that this could trigger disputes between the Abagusii and Kipsigis (Maxon, 2003). This reflected a broader focus on securing land for profitable farming and exotic livestock rather than prioritizing local land needs. Motanya (2019) similarly notes that land distribution favoured politically connected individuals, creating an elite class while many families remained without sufficient land. As a result, those with limited access sought wage labour in tea-growing areas outside Kisii. Omboto, who worked on Kericho tea estates after independence, recalled that life in the estates was demanding and that many youths migrated there due to lack of land and limited means to sustain indigenous food production (Dismus Omboto O.I.,22/10/2024). Ochoi stated:

My father was educated, but when I was still young, he developed a mental illness and was taken to Mathare Hospital. As I grew older, I came to understand that land was scarce at home since we were nine brothers. I married in 1962 and, the following year, I left for the Kericho tea estates where I got work as a tea plucker. With time, I was promoted to a supervisory position, known locally as omonyaapara, because I had helped bring several young men from our area to work in the estates. My main duty was to ensure they picked the tea properly. At Amasamba estate, we were given a small plot where we could plant maize and a few vegetables, which helped us feed our families and save part of our wages. From that place, I was able to encourage and bring many youths from home to work in the tea estates (Andrew Ochoi O.I.,21/10/2024).

The findings suggest that limited land access and growing household pressures pushed young men from Gusiiland to seek wage labour outside their homes, particularly in the Kericho tea estates. Employment in these estates offered an alternative means of sustaining families where subsistence farming was no longer viable due to land scarcity. As a result, labour migration became a survival strategy, drawing able-bodied youth away from indigenous food production and gradually weakening indigenous agricultural practices at the household level.

According to Osiemo (O.I., 3/11/2024) some workers who moved to the Amasamba tea estates were later joined by their families, reducing the availability of labour at home. Oucho (1984) also observes that high population pressure in Gusiiland caused land scarcity and fragmentation, prompting many to migrate to the Kericho tea estates in search of work. These movements illustrate the economic and social pressures facing Kisii residents at the time. Migration was often seasonal, with labourers returning home after peak tea-picking periods to use their earnings for school fees and farm improvements. Work in the estates was physically demanding, and exploitation occurred due to the absence of formal labour protections. Anari stated that besides seeking work on tea estates, some young men also earned income through timber work in forest areas, and he recalled travelling to Chepalungu for such employment. Matingu (1974) similarly notes that reduced farmland drove rural-to-rural migration, and that many migrants had limited formal education. This movement of youth into wage labour reduced the labour available for farming at home, contributing to the decline of indigenous food production.

The 1969 Census recorded a nine percent rise in urban populations. After independence in 1963, the removal of movement restrictions, including the travel pass system, allowed citizens to relocate freely. This policy shift encouraged movement from rural areas to towns, as people pursued better prospects. Limited employment in rural communities, declining agricultural output and shrinking farmland pushed many toward urban centres in search of steady wages and improved living conditions (Macharia, 2003). Morgan (1969) argues that towns offered opportunities for economic advancement that were scarce in the countryside. In Gusiiland, Kisii town served as the main commercial centre, with Keroka and Kebirigo emerging as additional points of urban growth.

Population growth and land subdivision played a major role in driving rural-to-urban migration in Kenya. As rural populations increased, pressure on agricultural land intensified, especially because colonial land policies had already restricted African access to fertile areas. Although the post-independence government attempted land redistribution, many families received plots too small to sustain subsistence farming. Inheritance practices that divided land among children further reduced plot sizes, making them less productive over time (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013). With shrinking parcels unable to meet household needs, many individuals sought income in the urban centers. Omweri noted:

Life in the village became difficult. The land we had could not support us, and whatever we harvested was never enough. When my father shared his land among my brothers and me, my portion was too small to provide for my family. I decided to leave for Nairobi and found work in construction as a mason. The little income I earned helped me support my family (Jonathan Omweri O.I., 23/102024).

The statement implies that land scarcity and subdivision limited subsistence farming, forcing individuals to seek wage employment in towns. Consequently, labour once devoted to indigenous food production shifted to urban work, reducing household farming and increasing dependence on purchased food. Similarly, Rempel (1981) notes that many young men moved to towns in search of better prospects, viewing urban areas as centres of economic opportunity. He notes that migrants often withdrew from indigenous food production, which required long-term commitment and instead preferred the stability of regular wage work. This shift contributed to the decline of indigenous food production among the Abagusii.

Education and Its Influence on Indigenous Food Production, 1963-1970

Zeleza (1991) notes that after independence in 1963, Kenya focused on reducing poverty, disease and illiteracy. Education was placed at the centre of national development and efforts were made to expand access across the country. In 1964, the Ominde Commission was established to reform the education system and align it with Kenya's social and economic goals. As Wanyama and Chang'ach (2013) observe, the commission highlighted education's role in rural development and in preparing youth with skills for employment. Government report shows that between 1963 and 1970, primary school enrollment rose by about sixty percent, while secondary enrollment increased by roughly three hundred and seven percent (Republic of Kenya, 1964).

Ngugi (2002) contends that in the early post-independence period, Kenya invested in agricultural education as part of its strategy to improve food production and stimulate economic growth. Agriculture was incorporated into the primary school curriculum to promote improved farming practices, although inadequate resources and a largely theoretical approach limited its impact. At the secondary level, agriculture was offered as an elective subject. According to Mochere, learners were introduced to cash-crop farming, factory processing and the importance of fertilizers in maintaining soil fertility (Gideon Mochere O.I., 22 October 2024). Eisemon and Nyamete (1988) similarly note that education during this era aimed to equip pupils with foundational literacy and numeracy skills, alongside agricultural training. Overally, the curriculum increasingly emphasized on preparing learners for rural economic participation and modern farming techniques, often at the expense of indigenous food production.

During this period, the 4-K Club programme commenced in Kenya in 1962, based on the American 4-H model. The name "4-K" stands for *Kuungana, Kufanya, Kusaidia* Kenya, meaning to unite, act and support the nation (4-K Clubs, 2024). Its purpose was to train young people in profitable agriculture and practical skills. Through these activities, the clubs helped improve youth livelihoods and encouraged participation in agricultural development. Onchari noted:

In 1967, we had a youth group known as the 4-K Club. It brought young people together to engage in farming activities. We planted maize and kales, starting by purchasing kale seedlings and raising them in a nursery before transplanting. Most members were boys, since we would wake up as early as 3:00 a.m. to cultivate before returning home to prepare for school at that time, I was in Standard Two. Elders in the community allocated us a piece of unused land for our farming activities. The club members came from Bomombera and Riondong'a villages, and the group operated on a rotational basis among these areas (Joseph Onchari O.I.,13/10/2024).

The narration implies that youth agricultural training shifted attention toward profitable agricultural production as opposed to indigenous food production. As a result, young people were encouraged to adopt modern farming practices and priorities, which contributed to reduced focus on indigenous food production. Anderson (1973) notes that the 4-K Clubs formed part of agricultural training programmes financed by the Ministry of Agriculture. In 1968, these clubs, together with farmers' training centres, received approximately one million pounds annually. This shows that the government placed greater emphasis on boosting agricultural productivity, particularly through high-value crop initiatives. Consequently, youth involved in such programmes focused more on commercially oriented farming, which contributed to declining attention toward indigenous food production.

Otete stated that the pursuit of education encouraged farmers to engage in commercial agriculture. He cultivated pyrethrum and maize for sale through the cooperative society in Rigoma and the maize control centre in Keroka, and he also kept grade cattle for income generation (William Otete O.I.,15/10/2024). Similarly, Omanga explained that the need to educate his children led him to lease land for farming in Kilgoris, where he grew passion fruits, cabbages, onions and tomatoes. The harvests were substantial and he transported produce by lorry to Kisumu and Luanda for sale over three days (Elijah Omanga, 30/10/2024). These clearly shows that priorities such as paying school fees and supporting the household encouraged participation in commercial, non-indigenous food production. Maenche recounted:

I was raised in Nyamaiya and attended Kisii School before proceeding to Form Five and Six, after which I joined Kamagambo Teachers' Training College for teacher training. During college, I oversaw poultry projects as agricultural education was part of the programme. After completing my studies, I moved to Kisii town for employment and later acquired a piece of land in Jogoo. Since retiring, I have not returned to engage in indigenous farming at home. I would visit my parents, who have since passed on, assist them with shopping, and then return to town. Urban life, where food is purchased rather than cultivated, together with work commitments and limited land, discouraged my participation in indigenous food production (Evans Maenche, 3/11/2024).

This account implies that formal education accelerated the decline of indigenous food production among the Abagusii. Education encouraged migration to towns in search of employment, leading many to abandon farming as a primary livelihood. Urban life and professional occupations reduced both time and land available for indigenous food production, while dependence on purchased food became the norm. Consequently, educated individuals became detached from indigenous farming practices, limiting the transfer of indigenous food production knowledge to younger generations further weakening indigenous food production practices.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Kenya's agrarian transformation, shaped by the Swynnerton Plan, altered the Abagusii indigenous land tenure system by replacing communal holdings with individualized land ownership. This reorganization promoted the cultivation of commercially viable crops and the keeping of exotic livestock, leading to major shifts away from indigenous food practices. At independence, the introduction of the five-year development plan reinforced this focus on market-oriented agriculture through the strengthening of cooperative societies. These developments encouraged both internal migration and expanded access to Western education. Collectively, these changes reduced reliance on indigenous food systems and aligned agricultural activities with modern economic priorities.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that, despite modernization and the growing emphasis on commercial agriculture, cultural and agricultural institutions within the Abagusii community strengthen efforts to educate the youth on the importance of preserving indigenous food knowledge and cultural values. Elders' councils and other cultural custodians, who possess valuable indigenous agricultural skills, food practices and moral teachings, should actively pass this knowledge to younger generations to safeguard cultural identity and support local food sustainability. Rather than allowing these practices to disappear, they should be integrated into contemporary learning spaces such as school agricultural programmes, youth empowerment initiatives and digital documentation platforms to ensure continuity.

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