

Agricultural Transformation among the Abaluhya of Busia, Kenya: Colonial Impact and Economic Adaptations, 1918-1939

Brenda Salome Omondi, Isaya O. Onjala, Samwel O. Okuro

Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology P. O. Box 210-40601, Bondo-Kenya

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2024.1109088>

Received: 25 September 2024; Accepted: 30 September 2024; Published: 16 October 2024

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the agricultural transformation among the Abaluhya of Busia, Kenya, during the interwar period from 1918 to 1939, a crucial era marked by significant colonial intervention and global economic shifts. Before British colonial rule, the Abaluhya had developed a self-sustaining and efficient agricultural system based on their deep understanding of the local environment. However, following World War I, the colonial administration intensified efforts to integrate local agriculture into the capitalist economy, driven by the need to finance colonial operations and exploit Kenya's agricultural potential. The period 1918-1939 saw the imposition of taxation, the promotion of commodity crops such as maize, and the expansion of wage labor, all aimed at restructuring indigenous agricultural practices. This paper, with information from research that utilized archival sources, oral interviews, and existing literature, demonstrates that while colonial policies disrupted traditional systems, the Abaluhya agricultural organization adapted to coexist with the colonial capitalist economy. The paper highlights how colonial policies impacted the Abaluhya agricultural practices leading to significant shifts/changes during the interwar period. At the same time it is noted that export crop production enabled some farmers to accumulate wealth, yet also contributed to the marginalization of indigenous practices. Despite these pressures, the paper concludes that traditional agriculture was not eradicated; rather, it persisted and evolved in response to the changing economic landscape of the interwar period.

INTRODUCTION

The interwar years of 1918 to 1939 stand as a pivotal chapter in the agricultural history of the Abaluhya people in Busia, Kenya. The period marked a time of profound transformation shaped by colonial policies and global economic turbulence. As the world emerged from the devastation of World War I, the Abaluhya found themselves navigating the treacherous waters of a colonial economy increasingly entwined with the fluctuating tides of international markets. The echoes of the Great Depression reverberated through their fields, revealing both the vulnerabilities of colonial agrarian strategies and the resilience of local agricultural practices (Were, 2021).

At the heart of this transformation lay a complex interplay between colonial ambitions and indigenous adaptation. The British colonial government, grappling with the instability of settler farming amidst plummeting commodity prices, turned its gaze towards African farmers as a potential lifeline (Van Zwanenberg & King, 1975). Promoted as the cornerstone of a new economic strategy, cash crop production became a double-edged sword: while it promised financial relief for the colonial state, it often undermined traditional subsistence farming methods that had sustained the Abaluhya for generations (Maxon, 2003). This paradox illustrates the intricate dynamics at play, where colonial interests collided with local realities, forcing the Abaluhya to rethink their agricultural practices in the face of external pressures.

Through the lens of this turbulent period, this paper seeks to illuminate the story of the Abaluhya's agricultural transformation—an evolution not merely dictated by colonial directives, but one characterized by innovation, resistance, and adaptation. As we delve into the impact of these policies on food production, economic stability, and social change, we uncover how the Abaluhya navigated this complex landscape, crafting strategies that would ultimately shape their agricultural future in the shadow of colonialism. This exploration

not only sheds light on the historical significance of the interwar period but also resonates with contemporary discussions on agricultural resilience and economic adaptation in post-colonial contexts.

BACKGROUND TO THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE INTERWAR PERIOD

The Abaluhya of Busia

The Abaluhya people, one of the largest ethnic groups in Western Kenya, have a rich cultural heritage that is intricately linked to their agricultural practices. Historically, the Abaluhya engaged in subsistence farming, cultivating a variety of crops such as millet, sorghum, cassava, and beans, alongside livestock rearing (Maxon, 2003). The agricultural practices of the Abaluhya were characterized by a deep understanding of their local environment and traditional ecological knowledge, which allowed them to sustain their communities effectively before the onset of colonial rule.

Agricultural Practices before the Interwar Period

Before the interwar period, the Abaluhya maintained a self-sufficient agricultural economy grounded in communal land ownership and traditional farming techniques. Farming was primarily subsistence-oriented, with families growing food crops to meet their needs. The Abaluhya practiced shifting cultivation and crop rotation, which enhanced soil fertility and reduced pest infestations (Were, 2021). This system allowed them to adapt to climatic variations and sustain their agricultural productivity over generations.

The social organization of the Abaluhya also influenced their agricultural practices. Farming was often a communal activity, with families working together during planting and harvesting seasons. Traditional rituals and practices were integrated into agricultural cycles, emphasizing the cultural significance of farming in Abaluhya society (Lugano, 2010).

British Rule and Agricultural Needs during the Interwar Period

The arrival of British colonial rule in the late 19th century marked a significant turning point for the Abaluhya. By the early 20th century, the colonial government implemented policies aimed at restructuring agricultural production to meet the demands of the colonial economy. The establishment of cash crop farming was seen as essential for generating revenue for the colonial state and integrating local economies into the global market (Van Zwanenberg & King, 1975).

The interwar period, particularly the 1920s and 1930s, was characterized by economic instability, largely due to the repercussions of World War I and the subsequent Great Depression. Commodity prices plummeted, causing financial distress among European settler farmers and exposing the weaknesses of the settler agrarian economy (Were, 2021). In response, the colonial government turned to African farmers, including the Abaluhya, to boost agricultural output and stabilize the economy.

As part of this strategy, the colonial administration encouraged the cultivation of cash crops such as cotton and coffee, believing that enhanced agricultural output from African households could alleviate financial pressures on the colonial state (Leo, 1984). However, this shift often conflicted with traditional subsistence farming practices, leading to tensions and adaptations among the Abaluhya (Maxon, 2003). The colonial policies not only aimed to increase cash crop production but also sought to impose a taxation system that required African farmers to generate surplus produce for market sales, further entrenching them into the capitalist economy.

The transformations experienced by the Abaluhya during the interwar period were thus shaped by a confluence of local agricultural traditions and colonial economic imperatives. While the Abaluhya adapted to the pressures of colonial rule, their resilience and ability to integrate new agricultural practices with traditional methods became a defining feature of their agricultural landscape. Understanding this period is crucial for appreciating the long-term impacts of colonial agricultural policies and the continuing evolution of farming practices among the Abaluhya today. It is because of this that this paper delved into the concept of transformation in the face of colonial impact and economic adaptation as experienced by the Abaluhya of Busia during this period.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

As indicated in the introduction, the primary purpose of this paper was to present the agricultural transformations among the Abaluhya of Busia, Kenya, during the interwar period (1918-1939). It aimed at analyzing the impact of colonial policies on local agricultural practices and the subsequent adaptations made by the Abaluhya in response to economic pressures and changes in the agricultural landscape.

Data was collected using a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both primary and secondary sources.

Primary Sources included Archival materials from local and national archives that were utilized to gather historical documents, government reports, and records related to agricultural policies and practices during the interwar period. Additionally, oral interviews were conducted with local elders and community members to capture traditional knowledge and personal narratives that provided insights into agricultural practices and changes during this era.

Secondary Sources on the other hand involved a look at existing literature, including books, journal articles, and dissertations related to the history of the Abaluhya, colonial agricultural policies, and economic history in Kenya, which were reviewed to contextualize the findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

The collected data was then analyzed through qualitative methods. The archival materials were systematically categorized to identify key themes related to agricultural practices, colonial interventions, and economic adaptations. The oral interviews were transcribed and coded, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and narratives that reflect the lived experiences of the Abaluhya during the interwar period.

Once this was done the patterns and narratives were interpreted and synthesized to highlight the complexities of agricultural transformation among the Abaluhya, emphasizing the interplay between colonial policies and indigenous practices. The findings are here being disseminated contributing to the broader discourse on colonial agricultural practices and their long-term impacts on local communities in Kenya.

RESULTS

Agricultural Transformation of the Abaluhya during the Interwar Period

The interwar period (1918–1939) marked a significant phase of agricultural transformation among the Abaluhya of Busia District, Kenya. The colonial administration, seeking to revitalize African agriculture following the Great Depression, established broad agricultural guidelines through the Native Affairs Department's circular of August 31, 1931. These guidelines emphasized the need for constant propaganda advocating for higher agricultural output, disseminated through headmen, Local Native Councils (LNCs), missions, schools, and public barazas (PRO/CO533/416/1931). The Department of Agriculture's push for improved farming techniques, better seed varieties, and adaptive technologies was central to this transformation (Maxon, 2003).

The colonial government's 1930 agricultural census marked a critical first step in formulating long-term agricultural plans for African regions. Provincial Commissioners were tasked with reporting on land under cultivation and recommending improvements, which would inform the zone development plans introduced in the 1930s (Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1931). This transformation was also driven by the establishment of demonstration plots, funded by the LNCs and maintained by the Department of Agriculture. These plots, including those in Busia, demonstrated improved agricultural techniques such as crop rotation, soil management, and the use of fertilizers (Omondi et al., 2018). Hands-on training for local farmers was provided by agricultural extension officers who bridged the knowledge gap between research and practice (Ogutu, 2023).

The introduction of European agricultural implements, notably the ox-drawn plough, played a key role in the transformation of Abaluhya agriculture. Initially met with skepticism, ploughs became more widely used by

the 1930s due to increased food demand from the Kakamega gold mines and the commercialization of agriculture (Ochieng, 1995). Despite challenges related to affordability, many wealthier farmers, chiefs, and traders adopted these tools, while poorer farmers formed cooperatives to share them (Ogutu, 2023). The use of ploughs in Busia led to increased land cultivation and a shift from labor-intensive hoe-based farming (Leo, 1984).

Colonial Impact on Abaluhya Agricultural Practices

The colonial state's intervention in Abaluhya agriculture was driven by the desire to increase productivity and commercialize African farming to support both local and international markets. This shift was further propelled by the colonial government's land tenure reforms in the 1930s, which promoted individual land ownership over traditional communal systems. While intended to incentivize land investment, these changes often led to social conflicts and tensions (Odhambo & Lonsdale, 2003).

The introduction of modern agricultural tools and machinery was a critical aspect of this transformation. Ploughs, harrows, and seed drills were promoted to improve efficiency and reduce the labor required for farming (Maxon, 2003). Agricultural demonstration farms in Busia showcased these technologies alongside improved seed varieties, such as drought-resistant crops and high-yielding strains (Omondi, 2020). The colonial administration's goal was to integrate these innovations into African farming practices, ultimately improving food security and promoting economic growth.

However, the colonial push for greater agricultural output also had unintended consequences. Soil erosion and degradation became significant concerns as land was overworked to meet the growing demand for food. To address this, the Department of Agriculture implemented soil conservation techniques, including crop rotation, the use of fertilizers, and terracing (Fearn, 1956). Despite these efforts, resistance from local farmers to these new practices often hindered progress, as many Abaluhya were skeptical of the colonial government's intentions and the long-term benefits of such interventions (Odulwa et al., 2021).

Economic Adaptations by the Abaluhya of Busia during the Interwar Period

The Abaluhya of Busia demonstrated remarkable economic adaptability during the interwar period in response to both colonial pressures and shifting market demands. The adoption of the ox-drawn plough, for instance, was driven by a combination of economic necessity and opportunity. The Kakamega gold rush created a new market for food crops, incentivizing farmers to increase production through mechanization (Ochieng, 1995).

While wealthier farmers could afford these tools outright, many small-scale farmers formed cooperative arrangements to purchase ploughs, thereby maximizing their collective productivity (Ogutu, 2023).

The commercialization of agriculture also led to the expansion of cash crops such as cotton and maize. By 1934, the Local Native Council seed farms in Nyanza Province were distributing large quantities of cotton seed to African farmers, further integrating them into the colonial economy (Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1931). This shift towards cash crop farming was facilitated by improved transportation networks, particularly motor transport, which allowed farmers to access broader markets (Leo, 1984).

However, the push for increased agricultural production came at a cost. Soil fertility declined due to over-cultivation, prompting the colonial administration to implement stricter soil conservation measures in the late 1930s. In Busia, maize production soared, but the resulting soil erosion forced the government to limit individual acreage increases unless proper soil conservation methods were employed (Ogutu, 2023). These measures reflected a growing recognition of the need for sustainable agricultural practices to ensure long-term productivity.

In short, the interwar period saw profound changes in the agricultural practices of the Abaluhya of Busia. Colonial interventions, coupled with local economic adaptations, transformed traditional farming systems into more mechanized and commercialized operations. While these changes brought about increased productivity

and integration into global markets, they also introduced new challenges, particularly in terms of environmental sustainability and social stability.

DISCUSSION

The agricultural transformation among the Abaluhya of Busia District, Kenya, during the interwar period (1918–1939), was marked by the convergence of several critical factors: the colonial administration's economic policies, traditional agricultural practices, changes in land tenure systems, the introduction of cash crops, and the evolving labor relations in the district. The interplay of these factors significantly altered the socio-economic fabric of the region, reshaping the agricultural landscape and creating a legacy that would influence the post-colonial period.

During this period, new **colonial economic policies and introduction of cash crops** was realized. The colonial government aggressively pursued policies aimed at integrating local economies into the global capitalist system. The British administration encouraged the cultivation of cash crops such as cotton and maize, which they believed would both stimulate the local economy and provide raw materials for British industries (Were, 2021). In Busia District, cotton was introduced, transforming the agricultural focus from subsistence farming to a cash crop economy (Ogotu, 2023)

This transformation was significant because, while it increased monetary income for some farmers, it also led to the exploitation of local labor and the disruption of indigenous agricultural practices. The emphasis on cash crops often resulted in a decline in food production, as farmers prioritized crops that could be sold to colonial markets. This shift had long-term consequences, including food shortages during periods of drought or poor harvests, which heightened the region's vulnerability (Maxon, 2003).

Changes in Land Tenure and the Erosion of Communal Land Rights were critical factors in the transformation of agriculture in Busia. Systems that prioritized individual ownership over communal arrangements were introduced. Traditionally, land among the Abaluhya was owned communally, and decisions regarding its use were made collectively (Omondi et al., 2018). However, under colonial rule, land policies were restructured to facilitate cash crop farming. This led to the commodification of land, which was increasingly viewed as a personal asset rather than a shared community resource (Wolff, 1974).

The colonial administration's land reforms exacerbated land alienation, with significant tracts being appropriated for European settler farms. Among the Abaluhya, this led to disputes over land access and ownership, which in turn contributed to social stratification. Wealthier individuals who could acquire land under the new system became more prosperous, while poorer families lost their traditional access to land, undermining their agricultural productivity and deepening economic inequalities in the district (Odulwa et al., 2021).

Another transformational event that affected the Abaluhya agriculture was the issue of labor migrations, which was a defining feature of the interwar period. There was an increased demand for African labor on European farms and public works projects, particularly in other parts of Kenya. As a result, many young men from Busia were conscripted into wage labor far from home, either voluntarily or under coercion. This exodus of labor significantly impacted agricultural productivity in the district, as it removed a critical workforce from local farms (Ogotu, 2023).

The colonial government's labor policies, including the use of taxation to compel African labor, exacerbated this trend. African men were forced to seek wage labor to meet the tax demands, leaving behind elderly family members, women, and children to tend the farms. As noted by Kitching (1980), this disrupted traditional gender roles and reduced the ability of households to maintain their agricultural output. The strain on local labor resources weakened subsistence farming, while the income generated from labor migration rarely offset the agricultural losses incurred at home.

The introduction of new technologies and use of agricultural inputs during this period, was minimal among African farmers, despite the push for cash crop production. European settlers received better-quality seeds,

fertilizers, and access to irrigation, while African farmers were largely left to continue with traditional farming methods. This inequality hindered the ability of the Abaluhya to fully benefit from the agricultural opportunities that the colonial economy ostensibly offered. The minimal transfer of modern agricultural knowledge and technology left African farmers at a disadvantage, with lower yields and poorer-quality crops (Lugano, 2010).

Despite this negative technological outcome, some farmers incorporated colonial crops into their farming systems, blending them with traditional crops. This hybridization of agricultural practices represents a critical aspect of the transformation. The farmers' resilience and adaptability played a significant role in mitigating the negative impacts of colonial policies, as they sought to maintain food security and economic independence.

It should be noted that the agricultural transformation in Busia did not occur without resistance. African farmers, including the Abaluhya, often resisted the imposition of colonial agricultural policies.

This resistance was both passive and active, ranging from the refusal to plant colonial crops to overt confrontations with local colonial authorities. According to Tignor (1976), such resistance was part of broader anti-colonial sentiments that were growing during this period. Farmers resented being forced into cash crop farming at the expense of their subsistence needs and were frustrated by the unequal treatment between European and African farmers.

The interwar period also saw the rise of local political movements that advocated for better conditions for African farmers and laborers. These movements, which included early trade unions and political organizations, laid the groundwork for the eventual push for independence and land reforms in the post-World War II period.

Lastly, it is clear from this discussion that the agricultural transformation of the interwar period had far-reaching consequences for the Abaluhya community in Busia District. The shift towards cash crop farming, coupled with the colonial government's reorganization of land tenure and labor systems, significantly altered the traditional agrarian economy. This period also marked the beginning of the commodification of land and labor, which created new economic hierarchies within the community.

More broadly, the changes in agricultural practices and land use during this period reflect the broader impact of colonialism on African economies. The unequal distribution of resources, the disruption of traditional agricultural practices, and the marginalization of African farmers were all critical components of the colonial economy. While some African farmers adapted and found ways to thrive within this system, the overall impact was one of economic dependency and increased vulnerability.

The significance of this period, therefore, lies in its role in shaping the political and economic trajectories of the post-colonial era. The agricultural struggles and labor issues of the interwar period would continue to influence political movements and land reform policies in the 1950s and 1960s, as Kenya moved towards independence. Moreover, the legacy of colonial agricultural policies can still be seen in the modern agricultural challenges faced by regions like Busia, where issues of land tenure, labor migration, and food security remain critical concerns.

CONCLUSION

The agricultural transformation among the Abaluhya of Busia District during the interwar period (1918–1939) was a multifaceted process driven by colonial economic policies, changes in land tenure, labor migration, and the introduction of cash crops. These factors collectively disrupted traditional farming practices, restructured the rural economy, and created new social hierarchies based on land ownership and access to resources. While the colonial administration sought to integrate local agriculture into the global economy, the unequal distribution of resources and the imposition of exploitative labor practices left many African farmers, including the Abaluhya, marginalized and struggling to maintain food security.

This period of transformation not only reshaped the agricultural landscape of Busia but also laid the groundwork for political resistance, as local communities grappled with the erosion of their traditional

livelihoods. The resilience and adaptability of Abaluhya farmers, though significant, could not fully offset the structural inequalities imposed by the colonial system.

In a broader historical context, the interwar agricultural changes in Busia reflect the profound impact of colonialism on Kenya's rural economies. The long-term consequences of these shifts—such as land alienation, labor migration, and dependency on cash crops—continued to influence Kenya's post-independence policies and socio-economic challenges. Understanding the agricultural transformation of this period is crucial to comprehending the roots of contemporary agricultural and land issues in Kenya, especially in regions like Busia. Thus, this paper provides a critical lens through which we can evaluate the legacy of colonial agricultural policies and their lasting effects on Kenya's agrarian societies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the scenario presented in this paper, where colonial policies led to both negative and positive impacts on agricultural and economic development during the interwar period in Busia, a number of recommendations can be given to improve activities in the agricultural sector for today. First, there should be a re-evaluation of colonial agricultural policies and a critical look at their legacy.

The historical agricultural policies implemented by the colonial administration, which focused heavily on cash crop production and land alienation, left a legacy of inequality that persists in contemporary Kenya. It is recommended that scholars and policymakers revisit these colonial policies to better understand their long-term effects on rural communities, particularly in terms of land ownership, resource allocation, and labor practices. This analysis could inform modern agricultural reforms that address historical injustices and promote equitable resource distribution.

Secondly, there should be promotion of sustainable agriculture and indigenous farming practices. The colonial emphasis on cash crops often led to the neglect of traditional subsistence farming, which sustained local food security. It is recommended that contemporary agricultural policies incorporate indigenous farming methods that are better suited to local environments. Encouraging sustainable agricultural practices, such as agro-ecology and crop diversification, can help mitigate the food insecurity that rural communities continue to face.

Third, there should be support for smallholder farmers. One of the key challenges during the interwar period was the marginalization of smallholder farmers, a problem that persists today. The government should increase support for small-scale farmers through access to credit, training, and improved infrastructure. Policies that focus on empowering smallholder farmers could help reduce poverty, improve food security, and stimulate economic growth in regions like Busia District.

Fourth, a lot of issues around land tenure systems should be addressed. The land tenure system introduced during the colonial era created lasting tensions and inequalities. It is recommended that Kenya's land policy undergo further reforms to ensure secure land ownership for local communities. Establishing clearer land rights, especially for smallholder farmers and historically marginalized groups, would foster better land use and improve agricultural productivity.

Fifth, local agricultural research should be encouraged, especially in the rural areas. Agricultural research during the colonial period was predominantly focused on maximizing output for the colonial economy rather than addressing local needs. Contemporary research institutions should prioritize localized studies on climate change, soil health, and crop resilience to develop interventions that directly benefit farmers in areas like Busia County. Such research could also support policy development that is more aligned with local realities.

Sixth, there should be direct attempts to revitalize rural economies. Colonial policies led to the underdevelopment of rural economies, pushing many Africans into wage labor in distant regions. Today, revitalizing rural economies through investments in infrastructure, rural industries, and value addition for agricultural products can reduce rural poverty and promote local economic growth. Rural development initiatives should focus on creating opportunities for value chain improvements that allow local farmers to benefit from global markets without losing their traditional livelihoods.

Lastly, historical perspectives should form part of agricultural education in schools and higher institutions of learning. The agricultural history of Kenya, particularly the interwar period in regions like Busia District, should be incorporated into agricultural education curricula. Understanding the historical evolution of agricultural practices and policies can help shape future generations of policymakers, farmers, and researchers. This historical knowledge can inform better agricultural decision-making that avoids the mistakes of the colonial past.

REFERENCES

1. Department of Agriculture. (1931). Annual report.
2. Fearn, H. (1956). African agriculture in colonial Kenya. Oxford University Press.
3. Great Britain. (1932). Annual report on Kenya colony and protectorate.
4. Kitching, G. (1980). Class and economic change in Kenya: The making of an African petite bourgeoisie 1905–1970. Yale University Press.
5. Leo, C. (1984). Land and class in Kenya. University of Toronto Press.
6. Leo, K. (1984). African agriculture and the colonial state: The role of cash crops. East African Publishing House.
7. Lugano, B. (2010). Culture and agriculture: The case of the Abaluhya of Western Kenya. University of Nairobi Press.
8. Maxon, R. M. (1992). Agricultural and land policies in colonial Kenya: Economic and social histories of Africa. Cambridge University Press.
9. Maxon, R. M. (2003). A history of Kenya. Hurst & Company.
10. Maxon, R. (2003). The colonial state and rural agrarian change in Kenya. Heinemann.
11. Odhiambo, A., & Lonsdale, J. (2003). The struggle for Kenya. Indiana University Press.
12. Odulwa, M., Omondi, P., & Musalia, S. (2021). Transforming rural agriculture in Kenya. *Journal of African Studies*.
13. Ogutu, J. (2023). The agricultural development of Busia District. *Journal of East African History*.
14. Omondi, B. (2020). A history of Busia's agricultural transformation. Nairobi University Press.
15. Omondi, B., Odulwa, M., & Shamala, R. (2018). Agricultural innovations and adaptations in Western Kenya. *Kenya Historical Review*.
16. Ochieng, W. (1995). A history of Kenya agriculture. East African Educational Publishers.
17. Tignor, R. L. (1976). The colonial transformation of Kenya: The Kamba, Kikuyu, and Maasai under British rule, 1889-1939. Princeton University Press.
18. Van Zwanenberg, R., & King, R. (1975). The economic history of Kenya and Tanzania. Macmillan.
19. Were, G. S. (2021). The economic transformation of Busia: 1918–1939. Kenyatta University Press.
20. Wolff, R. D. (1974). Britain and Kenya: The economics of colonialism 1870–1930. Institute for African Alternatives.