

COLONIAL ROOTS OF FOOD SHORTAGE IN KENYA: THE MARGINALIZAION OF THE AGIKUYU WOMEN’S INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM ON FOOD CROP PRODUCTION

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Abstract

Since pre-colonial period, the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) on food crop production have played a significant role in enhancing the supply of food in the society. This paper examines the effects of marginalization of Agikuyu Women's Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AWIKS) on food supply during the colonial period in Kiambu County of Kenya. This is done to show how the colonial land alienation, commercialized agriculture, and forced labor policies undermined and neglected the AWIKS on food crop production, which contributed to lack of enough food supply in the households. The findings demonstrate that due to intensive land alienation, the Agikuyu women lacked enough productive land for cultivation which led to poor crop harvest, inadequate space for food storage facilities, and increased destruction and spoilage of food crops due to poor storage. The European commercial fast growing high yield food crops were more vulnerable to increased temperatures, low rainfall, and they required high farm inputs and mechanization which were not affordable by the Agikuyu women. The paper concludes that the integration of indigenous knowledge systems and western modern scientific agricultural knowledge systems on food crop production can be an effective way of ensuring food security.

Key words: Colonialism, Women, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, crop production, Food shortage, marginalization.

1. Introduction

The role of the indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) on food crop production and in ensuring sufficient food supply in the households cannot be ignored. The knowledge held by indigenous men and women differed according to their customary responsibilities (IFAD, 2009). Within the traditional subsistence economy, women basically performed intensive food crop farming and household activities which they had to do daily or as seasonal routine. They therefore adapted to the climate changes by use of unique skills, local information and understanding (Ashley, 2000).

The traditional African women came up with unique and local specific skills and knowledge in selection of quality seeds for planting, weather observation and prediction, variety of indigenous farming methods that ensured soil suitability, management and protection, pests and plant disease control and also strategies of food crop storage and preservation. However, European colonial socio-economic practices in Kenya and particularly in Kiambu County undermined the existing AWIKS on food crop production. Consequently, as a result of establishment of colonial land alienation, commercial agricultural production and forced labor policies, Kiambu County slowly experienced increased shortage of food in the household. This paper is based within the premise that the marginalization of the AWIKS on food crop production during the process of colonialism in Kenya resulted to significant reduction of food supply in the households.

This paper recognizes the distinctive roles played by women's indigenous knowledge systems in enhancing food crop production in the Agikuyu traditional societies but also argues that it is how women were integrated into global capitalism by European colonialists that pushed their distinctive role in food crop production to the periphery. It is for this reason that Rathgeber (1990) suggests that there is urgent need to give equal value and recognition to both men and women's distinctive

roles in agricultural production. This will ensure sustainable food crop production and food security in the society.

According to Eyong (2017), colonialism was largely blamed for destroying African traditional cultural practices. The indigenous food crop production practices in most African communities suffered a huge set-back during colonial period since the European colonialists did not give food production the much needed attention which resulted to series of famine and food shortage (Yahaya, 2016). The colonial government was particularly biased against African women and had a preconceived idea of the role the African women should play in their economies as domestic workers and as cheap labourers in plantation agricultural production (Mies, 1986). FAO recognizes the importance of women, men and youth as change agents in agricultural adaptation (FAO, 2017).

African women's indigenous knowledge systems on food crop production were therefore not given due consideration during the implementation of the European colonial policies on agricultural modernization and commercialization. Instead, they were treated as useless, primitive and backward, and they were slowly disregarded and pushed to the periphery. Darko (1989) says that the present food crisis in Africa has its roots in the historical relationship between Africans and the western World and the only solution is for Africans themselves to integrate their indigenous science and technology with western agricultural technology. For example, the European capital penetration in Tanzania led to increased food shortage and famine during the colonial period and therefore shortage of food supply during the colonial and post-colonial period remained a major concern in many African countries (Bryceson, 1980).

In Kenya, the major pressure on African's indigenous practices was felt when the colonialists introduced the Land Order-in-Council of 1901 and the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1902. These two ordinances gave the colonial government jurisdiction over all lands previously occupied by Africans (Tignor, 1979; Sorrenson, 1967). Henceforth, the European colonialist intensively alienated African land and started large-scale commercial agricultural production. From that time now onwards, colonialism slowly transformed the traditional subsistence economy. African women were encouraged to engage in colonial capitalist economic production as cheap wage labourers, to participate in European capitalist commercial crop production and their access to traditional fertile land for cultivation was compromised. Ndege (2009) stated that by suppressing and marginalizing the indigenous subsistence production systems and depletion of the traditional drought tolerant crops throughout the colonial period, there was decreased food crop production by Africans. This research paper came up with a recommendation that can help in realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 on 'eradicating extreme poverty and hunger'.

Kiambu West Sub-Counties (Kikuyu, Limuru and Lari) where this research was conducted has massive areas with diverse soil fertility and agricultural productive ecosystem. Hence, this area offered a great attraction to the European Settlers capital penetration as it had potential for large-scale capitalist agricultural production. However, evidence shows that the three Sub-Counties (Kikuyu, Limuru and Lari) of Kiambu West suffered widespread food shortage crisis during the colonial period (Lambert, 1956; Throup, 1988; Gachihi, 1986). For example, in early 1917 and 1918 Kiambu experienced severe food shortage (*Ngaragu ya thika*) and in early 1930's the area

was hit by another acute locust famine (*ng'aragu ya Itono*) (McGregor, 1927), while Throup (1988) also reported that in 1941-1942 and 1954-1955 the people of Kiambu experienced serious food shortage or the cassava famine (*Ng'aragu ya mianga*). Further, African Women's Studies Centre (AWSC), found out that currently in Kiambu County, about 8.5% of the households have no food at all and are suffering from chronic food shortage (AWSC, 2014).

Indigenous knowledge is very important aspect of development of the local people and therefore if it is ignored it can cause failure in sustainable development (Brokensha & Warren, 1980). The use of indigenous knowledge systems on food crop production remains a viable option for developing economies to reduce drought impacts (AgriSA 2016; Iloka 2016). Therefore, both the indigenous knowledge systems and the modern scientific knowledge on food crop should be integrated to enhance food crop production.

2. Research Findings and Discussions

2.1 Colonial Land alienation, Marginalization of AWIKS and Food shortage

When the Europeans passed the Crown-Lands Ordinance of 1902, an influx of European Settlers were encouraged to settle in Kiambu because it occupied a unique geographical position and due to its diverse land mass that offered high potential for diverse agricultural production (Sorrenson, 1968). The European demarcated the fertile land and the Agikuyu were pushed to the reserves in the northern side near Aberdare and Lari forest and others were moved to in the South-West land of Ndeiya, Karai and Kikuyu which was semi-arid plain covered by lava and volcanic dust (KNA/MAI/7/12/1903). Land alienation pushed the Agikuyu people to marginal and unproductive reserves that were created for them by Europeans in areas that lacked enough soil fertility & large track of land with diverse ecological system. The large fertile land was previously used for indigenous knowledge such as rotational and fallow farming in order to ensure adequate food supply in all seasons (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Effect of Marginalization of AWIKS on Availability of Food

Effect on food supply	Frequency	Percentage
Marginal reserve & squatter areas lacked enough soil fertility	52	76.5
Poor food crop harvest	26	38.2
Inadequate storage facilities due to lack of enough space	21	30.9
Soil degradation caused deterioration of food crop production	23	33.8
Insufficient food crop cultivation due to political instability	18	26.5
European Commercial food crops not affordable by many households	35	51.5
European High Yield Crops vulnerable to drought	15	22.1
Low cheap labour wages not enough for purchasing food crops	27	39.7
Interviews conducted	68	100

Fifty two (76.5%) of the respondents observed that land was very scarce and not enough for food crop production in the reserves, squatter land, villages and camps such that it may have contributed to lack of sufficient food crop production in the households (Table 2.1). This was evident by poor

food crop harvests and inadequate food crop storage facilities in various villages, squatters and in reserves.

Anderson & Throup (1985) further corroborated with respondents as he pointed out that the extensive land alienation limited the Agikuyu women's access to land and land use resources, which resulted to significant loss of some indigenous food crops production knowledge. Furthermore, McGregor (1927) stated that agricultural production deteriorated due to serious shortage of farming space and soil degradation on the Agikuyu reserves and also due to the outbreak of influenza in 1918-1919, rider pest that led to loss of people who produced the crops and destruction of food crops by rider pests. All this contributed to the reduction of adequate food supply in the households during the colonial period. Mwangi (2014) argued that colonialism through land alienation and individualized land tenure that was founded on British policies in Kikuyuland led to land degradation, which played a significant role in marginalizing the African indigenous knowledge on land and soil conservation.

Due to lack of enough space for food storages in the Agikuyu reserves, squatter land and in villages, women could not properly store or preserve their food well for long without getting spoiled. They tended to store their food on the floor of the house, in communal granaries, in congested bags, baskets and sacks where food crops were often destroyed, spoiled and damaged by pests and rodent as mentioned by one of the respondents (Prisca Nyokabi O.I, 20118).

2.2 Effect of Colonial Political Instability on AWIKS and its effects on Food Supply

During the colonial period, the political instability that was experienced during the First and Second World Wars, the 1920s and 1930s Nationalist activities and during Mau Mau War was characterized by deterioration in agricultural production and severe soil degradation in the Agikuyu reserves and villages. The political turmoil and anxiety, loss of lives and lack of time led to very minimal food crop cultivation in the area. Eighteen (26.5%) of the respondents stated that during this period of political instability there was continuous suppression and disregard of women's indigenous Knowledge system on food crop production and this contributed to the severity of drought and famine that was experienced in Kiambu during the period of political instability. Majority of the respondents viewed that the food crop that was being cultivated at this time was little, hardly enough to sustain food supply in the household, most people in the reserves and in the emergency villages were eating only one meal per day when it was available.

In the reserves there was increased crowding population that caused serious soil degradation and food shortage. Evidence from the archival records shows that there was an increased visibility of soil erosion and destruction of food crops in the reserves, villages and in squatter land increased (KNA/ MAI/12/14, 1918-1919; KNA/MAI/12/23, 1928). This highly contributed to severe drought and a series of famine that hit Kiambu District in the years 1918-1919, 1929-1931 and another acute food shortage was experienced during the Second World War between 1942 and 1943 (KNA/MAI/12/33,1939). Furthermore Ndeiya, Njumbi, Karai, Karii, Gikambura, Rutaria of Kiambu West were some of the areas that experienced another severe food shortages or the cassava famine (*Ngaragu ya Mianga*) between 1942 and 1943 when government administrators were distributing the cassava crop flour to mitigate food shortage in the area (KNA/CS/1/2/11/1939-

1941). Another acute famine was experienced during the Mau Mau War. This was a clear indication that if the colonial government had encouraged the production of plenty of traditional drought resistant crops such as cassava as they did to other commercial crops, and encourage the indigenous communities to continue using their indigenous skills and knowledge on food crop production, perhaps the food shortages and famine in the area would not have been very severe.

During the Wars there was a complete disorganization of the Agikuyu traditional food crops production systems. The Agikuyu people were moved to areas with unfavorable weather conditions, unpredictable climate pattern variation, poor drained soil, low rainfall. Twenty six (38.2%) of the respondents mentioned that due to such environmental conditions, there was poor food crop harvest in many households due to poor soil infertility. The lack of enough soil cover due to harsh condition, the soil for cultivation had less nutritional value and had become fragile such that the diverse food crop production was not guaranteed (Mwangi, 2014). Failure to access fertile cultivating land led to persistent low food crop productivity in squatter land and in the reserves (Overton, 1988).

2.3 Commercialized Agriculture, the marginalization of AWIKS and shortage of food availability

When the European established large-scale cash crop farms for coffee and tea in Kiambu area, the colonial government did not encourage the Agikuyu people to grow the cash crops. Instead, they were encouraged to grow food crops such as maize and beans for exports in order to earn money to pay taxes and improve their living standards (KNA/MAI/16/14,1911). The colonial government emphasized on large plantation agriculture for the new cash crops such as tea, coffee and pyrethrum while food crops were not given a lot of attention and were planted on the land that was unsuitable for commercial cash and food crops (KNA/BV/6/95, 1943). Anderson & Throup (1985) observe that the imposition of commercialized agricultural cash crop and food crop production focused on capitalist economic gains other than food supply for the well-being of the community.

Thirty five (51.5%) of the respondents reported that the European commercial agricultural production reduced the production of traditional drought resistant crops which undermined the use of AWIKS on food crop production (Table 2.1). Therefore, the lack of proper use of the AWIKS on food crop production contributed to decrease in food crop supply in the households. The European commercial horticultural food crops that were introduced in hilly Limuru and Lari areas of Kiambu slowly became staple food for the community. However, the fast growing commercial food crops & high yield horticultural crops that were introduced in Kiambu were more vulnerable to increased temperatures, low rainfall and required high farm inputs and farm mechanization and in most cases not affordable by the Agikuyu women (Joseph Mbuthia, O.I 2017). Hence, since the women had already abandoned some of the indigenous knowledge systems in food crop production, and they could hardly afford to purchase the European western farm inputs, they were not able to produce sufficient food for their families.

Respondents reported that the Europeans did not encourage the use of indigenous farming practices in their large-scale plantations and therefore the AWIKS on food crops were neglected and marginalized and some were totally abandoned. Turner & Katherine (2006) stated that lack of

abundance indigenous crops and loss of access to traditional food resources certainly played a role in reduction of food crop production. The export of food crop for monetary income in 1920s and 1930s despite the fact that there was internal food shortages also contributed significantly to reduced availability of food (KNA/DC/MUR/3/2/6/1943-1953). FAO (2016) reported that in the twentieth century food crop diversity was lost due to replacement of local food crop varieties with High Yield Varieties (HYVs) and fast growing commercial food crops. The European High Yield Varieties and fast growing crops were not resilient to drought, pest and diseases, a factor that put the community at risk of experiencing a series of severe food shortage. The indigenous drought tolerant food crops have been reported to improve soil fertility through nitrogen fixation capacity and they are very rich sources of calories (Gathungu, 2018).

Respondents Josphat Waikwa, O.I (2017) & Agnes Watetu, O.I (2017) stated that in the traditional setup the Agikuyu community was always concerned about the type of food that they produced including their quantities and qualities. The traditional communities also consumed different traditional food for nutritional and therapeutic purpose (Turner and Katherine, 2006). Waithaka Njuguna, O.I (2018) revealed that as colonial period progressed, the Agikuyu people had reduced the gathering and consumption of wild foods such as fruits, wild leafy vegetables such as stinging nettle and *terere*, and other edible root and tuber crops. These traditional food crops did not require extensive labor because women gathered most of them were scattered by women in the homestead garden to grow and they adapted well in new ecological zones. This caused a shift in the staple food consumed by the Agikuyu people such that the majority of Agikuyu people slowly started to consume a combination of indigenous food crops and western European food crops.

Majority of the respondents also mentioned that the Agikuyu staple food mainly changed from the traditional food *Mataha- irio*, whole grain cereals, root crops, tuber crops, fruits and traditional vegetables, to a variety of horticultural crops such cabbage, kales, carrots, *Irish* potatoes, refined maize flour, tea and bread. The transition in staple food consumption resulted in the increased consumption of refined food, which hastens the increase of non-communicable diseases like obesity and diabetes (Verena & Cheema, 2007). This meant that the Agikuyu Women could rely mostly on cash (money) they got from low wage labor to buy the indigenous food crops they could not grow. One of the respondent stated that in most cases, the indigenous food crops were not available in the nearby market (Helen Mukuhi, O.I, 2017). The wage labour money was however not enough to buy sufficient food in the households. Robertson (1997) noted that by mid-1950s the whole of Kiambu District was producing less of maize requirements to feed its population, and that it needed to buy about 100,000 bags to efficiently supply its population.

2.4 European Labour Policies, Marginalization of AWIKS on food crop production and shortage of food supply

According to Presley (1992), in order to force the Agikuyu people into the forced labour, the colonial government imposed heavy taxes and low wages for the Africans so as to create specific need for cash money. McGregor (1927) stated that various native labour laws were introduced following the Northey circular in 1919 required the district officers and chiefs to procure African labour including women and juvenile children, who were employed to pick tea and coffee in European plantations. The demand for women labour rose tremendously during the biggest harvests

season started in October and reached its height in December and another mini-picking season was between April and June when only few coffee berries were ripe while tea, pyrethrum and sisal picking went throughout the year (KNA/MAI/12/14 1918-1919). Therefore, the greatest demand for women's cheap labour took place between November and April when a significant number of women were engaged in European low wage labour. According to the World Bank (1993), the intensive involvement of women in forced low wage labour disrupts the proper utilization of IKS on land preparation, time for planting the food crops, weeding and harvesting calendar leading to delayed food crop production activities and reduced food crop yields.

Twenty seven (39.7 %) of the respondents mentioned that Agikuyu women's labour wage was very low and hardly enough to buy sufficient horticultural food crops in the households (Table 2.1). Furthermore, Presley (1992) observed that the minimum wage for unskilled or semi-skilled women labour was very low compared to that of their male counterpart. Therefore, lack of enough money to purchase food stuffs due to extremely low labour wages that the women were being paid reduced food supply in the households. Hence, between 1939 and 1945 the Agikuyu women were forced to engage in petty businesses in food items mainly horticultural products, poultry and eggs in order to mitigate food shortages in their households (Sorrenson, 1967; Gachihi, 1986). By the 1930s, food shortages and malnutrition had become a very common feature in Kikuyu land (Ahlberg, 1991).

3. Conclusion

During the Colonial period traditional AWIKS on food crop production was slowly disregarded and marginalized by European colonialists. The Europeans intensively alienated African fertile land, increased commercial agricultural production, and forced the Agikuyu people to provide cheap labor for them which led to neglect of traditional food crop production using indigenous knowledge system. All this resulted to minimal utilization of indigenous skill and knowledge, which decreased food supply in the household. Consequently, the Agikuyu people of Kiambu experienced a series of severe shortage of food during the colonial period due to neglect and marginalization of AWIKS on food crop production. Therefore, the study concludes the integration of AWIKS and western scientific agricultural knowledge on food crop production could be an effective way of ensuring food security.

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