

The Ecology and Economic Practices of the Isukha and Idakho Communities in Colonial Period 1895-1963

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The penetration of colonialism in Isukha and Idakho can best be understood within the general framework of the global imperialism of the nineteenth century, with Europe being the hub of global imperialism where the imperialists were motivated by economic, humanitarian and strategic factors. After the 1886 and 1890 Anglo-German treaties at Berlin's conference, East Africa was divided between the British and the Germans. British East Africa (Kenya and Uganda) was under the control of the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEACo). In 1894, Uganda was declared a protectorate and its sphere included the Baluyia. This same year, protectorate officials were sent to Mumias, which was by then a traders' entry-point on the road to Uganda. This paper analyses the ecology and economic environment of the Bisukha and Bidakho of the Luyia community during the colonial epoch. The paper took a qualitative approach to data collection, engaging participants in oral interviews and focused group discussions on understanding the two community practices. In what is termed an ethnographic approach, the author finds that the natives lost control of resources that were crucial in the proper management of their environments and the practice of various economic activities. This paper, therefore, finds that Land as a natural resource was alienated with forests being gazetted and animals confiscated to feed the soldiers of World Wars I and II.

Introduction

Strategically, Britain intended to use Kenya and Uganda as a base for controlling the rival powers in the Nile Valley, especially the French.¹ The European powers, therefore, partitioned Africa among themselves like players in a rough game.² Before the advent of colonialism, Kenya, in general, and Buluyia, in particular, had witnessed the incoming of foreign visitors. By 1850 the Swahili

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1. T. Tvedt, "About the importance of studying the modern history of the countries of the Nile Basin in a Nile perspective," in *The River Nile in the Post-Colonial Age* 1(11) (Uganda, Macmillan Press, 2010); M. P. K. Sorrenson, *Land Reform in the Kikuyu County: A Study Government Policy* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968); Emmanuel B. Kasimbazi, "The impact of colonial agreements on the regulation of the waters of the River Nile," *Water International* 35, no. 6 (2010): 718-732; Angelique Haugerud, "Land tenure and agrarian change in Kenya," *Africa* 59, no. 1 (1989): 61-90.

2. A. Atmore, and R. Oliver, *Africa Since 1800* (Cambridge, University Press, 1974), 103. And see also Saadia Touval. "Treaties, borders, and the partition of Africa." *The Journal of African History* 7, no. 2 (1966): 279-293.

and Arab merchants had already crossed the country on their way to Buganda.³ Further inroads in Buluyia were witnessed in the 1880s and 1890s with caravan traders, including Asians.⁴ At the same time, European adventurers and missionaries were pioneering the area. This made Joseph Thompson the first European to forge a direct link between Mombasa and Uganda in 1883.⁵ Caravan traders, visitors, missionaries and adventurers had to pass through Mumias because "Chief Mumia had always been friendly to them and later to the protectorate administrators".⁶

The colonial administrators decided to use indirect rule where some local chiefs and headmen were to assist in the administration. According to Hobley (1970), selecting a representative chief from each tribe was a custom and conducting all negotiations through the selected individuals.⁷ In times of resistance, the administrators employed the philosophy of force advocated by A.H. Handinge in 1897,⁸ with the Eastern Province of Uganda being transferred to the East African protectorate (Kenya) in 1902. Thus, it became the Nyanza province or the Kavirondo.⁹ This is where the area of study was placed in the colonial epoch.

This study aimed to examine how colonial penetration and its policies and practices affecting the socio-economic and ecological set-up of the Isukha and Idakho communities of Western Kenya from 1895-1963. This paper provides a brief literature review, methodological approach, discussion of the study's findings, and conclusion.

3. C. W. Hobley, *Kenya: From Chartered Company to Crown Colony* (London, Frank Lass & Co. Ltd, 1970). And see M. A. J. Ndeda, "Population movement, settlement and the construction of society to the east of Lake Victoria in precolonial times: the western Kenyan case," *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est/The East African Review* 52 (2019): 83-108.

4. R. W. Ochieng, *A Pre-colonial History of the Gusii of Western Kenya. c.A.D. 1500-1914*. (Nairobi: EALB, 1974). The same idea is shared by S. B. Nyagosia, *Historical Study of Border Interactions and Militarism between the Abagusii of Southwestern Kenya and their Neighbouring Communities, 1850-2007* (Kisii University, 2017), 38.

5. M. E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa* (Routledge, 2014). And see J. Barnhart, "Status competition and territorial aggression: evidence from the scramble for Africa," *Security Studies* 25, no. 3 (2016): 385-419.

6. Hobley, *Kenya: From Chartered Company to Crown Colony*, 1970. The same idea is shared by, HRT, "Kenya: From Chartered Company to Crown Colony. Thirty Years of Exploration and Administration in British East Africa," (1930): 202-205.

7. Ibid.

8. G. H. Mungeam, *Kenya: Selected Historical Documents, 1884-1923* (Nairobi: EAPH, 1979). And see, Sana Aiyar, "Empire, race and the Indians in colonial Kenya's contested public political sphere, 1919-1923," *Africa* 81, no. 1 (2011): 132-154.

9. J. D. Ainsworth, *Pioneer Kenya Administrator 1864-1946* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1955). The same idea is shared by Goran Hyden, "Social Structure, Bureaucracy and Development Administration in Kenya," *The African Review: A Journal of African Politics, Development and International Affairs* (1972): 118-129.

Literature Review

On 15th June 1895, a Protectorate, the East Africa Protectorate, was declared over the territory between Uganda and the coast (Kenya). By 30th June 1895, the area was under Protectorate authorities. However, it was not until 1905 that the administration of the East Africa protectorate was handed over to the colonial office.¹⁰ It is ironic that in 1901 when the rail line from Mombasa to Port Florence (Kisumu) was completed, the initial strategic necessity had no relevance to resolving the Fashoda crisis and the British conquest of Sudan.¹¹ Thus, interwoven with the economic and humanitarian factors, the strategic reason motivated Britain to occupy East Africa, primarily the Uganda Protectorate, of which Bisukha and Bidakho were part.¹²

In the areas where Africans tried to resist the motives of the imperialist, punitive military expeditions were undertaken, and pacification of societies was applied.¹³ Remote areas with resources highly cherished were opened up, and the "natives" were turned into a pool of cheap labour, alienated from their mode of traditional production through taxation, land alienation and passed laws.¹⁴

This was evident in all strategies of colonial administration: Assimilation, indirect rule, association and direct rule. The colonial powers needed an administrative structure that could adequately maintain law and order, collect taxes and service the economy. Furthermore, they devised ways of setting up political machinery capable of regulating conflicts within the African population and with regard to their relations with expatriate imperial administrators.¹⁵

Colonial penetration in Isukha and Idakho areas, however, proceeded at a slow pace. Although by 1895, the colonialists had arrived at Mumias, it was only in 1905 that the colonial strings had strongly tied the Bisukha and Bidakho to the general global capitalist system. The establishment of colonial rule was easily

10. C. Eliot, *The East Africa Protectorate* (London: Arnold, 1905). And see also, Thomas P. Ofcansky, "Kenya forestry under British colonial administration, 1895–1963," *Journal of Forest History* 28, no. 3 (1984): 136-143.

11. R. J. Ellis, *A Geography of Vertical Margins: Twentieth Century Mountaineering Narratives and the Landscapes of Neo-imperialism* (University of Colorado at Boulder, 1990). Cf. Kanogo, "Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya," 2008.

12. William Robert Ochieng, and Robert M. Maxon (Eds.), *An economic history of Kenya* (East African Publishers, 1992).

13. W. K. Storey, "Big cats and imperialism: Lion and tiger hunting in Kenya and Northern India, 1898-1930," *Journal of World History* 2, no. 2 (1991): 135-173.

14. C. Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The untold story of Britain's gulag in Kenya* (Macmillan, 2005).

15. J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial policy and practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). Cf. R. A. Zolberg, "The structure of political conflict in the new states of tropical Africa," *American Political Science Review* 62, no. 1 (1968): 70-87.

achieved through the Maxim gun.¹⁶ In as much as Nabongo Mumia accepted to befriend the white man, some communities in Buluyia opted to rise in arms but with little success. This was because there was a military technological gap where the hand-made spears and arrows could not match the mighty gun.¹⁷ Thus, forcibly, the Bisukha and Bidakho were entrenched in colonialism that affected their social, economic, ecological and political systems. Colonialism, therefore, fashioned the entire pre-capitalist institutions to the liking of the metropolis.¹⁸

Attempts to put Western Kenya under European rule began in 1894 when Buganda was declared a Protectorate encompassing Kisumu and Naivasha districts.¹⁹ In 1900, these two districts became the Eastern Province of Uganda. In the same year, Valet Frederick Spire began the first attempts to subjugate the neighbouring groups from Mumias. This was made possible because the Wanga were ready to help Mr Spire as their leader. Mumia was already a friend of the white man.²⁰

By 1896, Mumias had become the launching pad for establishing colonialism in the Western region of Kenya and the neighbouring areas occupied by the Nandi and Uasin Gishu Maasai.²¹ Until 1902, before Eastern Province was transferred to East African Protectorate, Mumias was merely regarded as a supply zone to the traders en route to Uganda.²² At Mumias, traders replenished their food supplies and rested before resuming their journey to the north in search of ivory and enslaved people. Later in 1903, C.W. Hobley opened Kakamega as a second control centre for Mumias.²³

In 1895, Charles Hobley took over the administration of the District of North Kavirondo, of which Bisukha and Bidakho were part. Hobley had to employ his

16. Mungeam, *Kenya: Selected Historical Documents, 1884–1923*, 1979. See also, B. Cooke, "A new continuity with colonial administration: participation in development management," *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2003): 47-61; Hobley, *Op.Cit.*

17. Aliavikali Dongolo (Village elder and Herbalist), Oral Interview at his home Ilala on 7th July, 1995.

18. Parry, Benita, *Postcolonial studies: A materialist critique* (Routledge, 2004).

19. M. Wa Mutua, "Why Redraw the Map of Africa: A moral and legal inquiry," *Mich. J. Int'l L.* 16, no. 1113 (1994). Cf. Makau Mutua, "Human rights in Africa: the limited promise of liberalism," *African Studies Review* 51, no. 1 (2008): 17-39.

20. Hobley, *Op. Cit.*

21. A. K. Murgor, and B. Kipsang Rop, "Origin, Spread and Impact of Islam on Nandi Traditional Religion and Culture: A Case of Nandi County, Kenya," 2021.

22. J. R. Dealing, *Politics in Wanga, Kenya, c.1650-1914* (Northwestern University, 1974), 327. Cf. J. Lonsdale, "Politics in Kenya-Kenya: the Politics of Participation and Control. By Henry Bienen. Princeton University Press, 1974," *The Journal of African History* 16, no. 3 (1975): 476-477.

23. A. R. Tucker, and A. Tucker, *Eighteen Years in Uganda & East Africa* (Edward Arnold, 1911); M. Abu-Jamal, *All Things Censored* (Seven Stories Press, 2001). Cf. Ward Churchill, and Pierre Orelus, "Confronting Western Colonialism, American Racism, and White Supremacy," *Counterpoints* 430 (2012): 56-112.

maxim gun to organise a number of punitive expeditions to bring under control the resisting groups such as Kager, Samia, Bukusu, Banyala, Bisukha and Bidakho, and the Tiriki.²⁴ At the same time, Hopley, in 1900, had to send expeditions against the Nandi, who had raided the company and the telegraph and railway survey parties.

The completion of the railway had to some extent, entrenched colonialism in Buluyia, the entire Nyanza Province and the Protectorate of Uganda as African resistances were easily suppressed as transportation of soldiers became easier.²⁵ It also intensified trading activities making possible European settlement in the Western highlands after the encouragement of Sir Charles Elliot for many settlers to come for alienation of land and the eventual occupation. Charles Eliot argued that the completed Uganda railway was to pay for itself through settler farming.²⁶ By 1905, J. D. Ainsworth had identified potential farming lands in Trans-Nzoia and Kitale. He described this land as a 'wonderful' asset in the Kavirondo region.²⁷ Be that as it may, the creeping colonial capitalist system and the commoditisation of production changed the nature of land ownership, livestock keeping, labour promotion and the traditional ecological knowledge that had been preserved for a long.²⁸ This was done through the various land ordinances and labour laws instituted. For instance, herbal medicine and iron working experienced fundamental changes during colonial rule.²⁹ Introducing new medications for animals and people appeared more potent than herbs. In the same vein, the gazettement of the forest also contributed to the limited utilization of the forest resources, especially herbs.

The beginning of the use of the ox-plough after World War I contributed to the decline in iron working activities which had been practised for a long.³⁰ Thus, it can be inferred that colonialism in Western Kenya was determined to change the society's way of life without paying attention to the complex relationship

24. Hopley, *Op. Cit.*; E. M. Aseka, *The Colonial Economy During and After the Second World War and Political Activities in Buluyia*. Staff Seminar Paper No. 6 (History Department, K.U., 1989).

25. E. L. I. H. Wasike, *Alienation of Abashitaho's land rights, 1920-1963* (Kenyatta University, 2018).

26. Ainsworth, *Pioneer Kenya Administrator 1864-1946*, 1955. Cf. Hyden, "Social Structure, Bureaucracy and Development Administration in Kenya," 1972.

27. *Ibid.*

28. P. Rosset, "Re-thinking agrarian reform, land and territory in La Via Campesina," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40, no. 4 (2013): 721-775.

29. D. F. Bryceson, "African rural labour, income diversification & livelihood approaches: a long-term development perspective," *Review of African Political Economy* 26, no. 80 (1999): 171-189.

30. P. J. Tanui, "A Gender Analysis of the Influence of Colonial Policies on Access to Land and Agricultural Technology among the Nandi in Kenya, 1895-1954," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 5, no. 9 (2015).

between ecology, culture and economic factors.³¹ This explains the major disarticulation in terms of harnessing resources. Before colonialism, Isukha and Idakho traditional culture had somewhat balanced the ecological and economic factors. However, these cultures were regarded as 'primitive' and barbaric. Traditional African wise men and women and the likes of Lukholo, who had the conventional rainmaking magic, were given no preference. Their place was taken by colonial officers who were the apostles of westernization.

Colonial infiltration and its effects were exacerbated by the changes evident in demography. Starting from 1905, due to suitable medication, the population of North Kavirondo societies began to witness an upsurge. According to Esese (1990),³² the people of the entire Buluyia were expanding alarmingly, and resources, especially land, were threatened. Hardly could one find empty land by the 1930s as it had been alienated. The rising population spurred changes in the modes of production. Some of the changes were expansion in agricultural land and improved technology. A lot of food was required for consumption and sale.³³

In this regard, demographic change, new ideas, new technology and resource exploitation led to the decline of old economic practices. The old socio-economic set-up could not support the increasing population.³⁴ New perceptions led to new ideas, consequently altering pre-colonial economic systems. This opinion is also shared by Ominde (1975),³⁵ who asserts that, as the population increases, the people's perception also changes to enable them to provide more food. For instance, the pre-colonial perception of forests changed, and people cleared part of the forests to get more virgin land to support the growing population.

31. G. Austin, "Resources, techniques, and strategies south of the Sahara: revising the factor endowments perspective on African economic development, 1500–2000," *The Economic History Review* 61, no. 3 (2008): 587-624.

32. D. P. L. Esese, *Agriculture and Socio-Economic Change among the Wanga of Mumias Division, 1860-1945* (K. U, Nairobi, 1990), 206. See also, A. Fiona, and D. Mackenzie, "Contested ground: Colonial narratives and the Kenyan environment, 1920–1945," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 4 (2000): 697-718.

33. Bryceson, "The scramble in Africa: reorienting rural livelihoods," 2002.

34. B. B. Bock, "Rural marginalisation and the role of social innovation; a turn towards nexogenous development and rural reconnection," *Sociologia Ruralis* 56, no. 4 (2016): 552-573.

35. S. H. Ominde, "Ecology and Man in East Africa," in *Hadith 7 Ecology and History in East Africa* (ed.) B. A. Ogot (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1975). Cf. K. D. Wright, "New perspectives on early regional interaction networks of East African trade: A view from Tsavo National Park, Kenya," *African Archaeological Review* 22, no. 3 (2005): 111-140.

Methodology

From an ethnographic research design perspective, the author engages various scholars and elders from the two communities in conducting a survey to establish the Bisukha's and Bidakho's economic systems during the colonial period.³⁶ This research design was deemed appropriate for the study as the author was able to gain the native's point of view, carry out the study from the inside and experience both the culture and the economic environment³⁷ of the Bisukha and Bidakho. According to Fetterman (2010), in ethnographic research, the study is often conducted from the cultural environment's lens to understand the people's lives in a community.³⁸ To gain insight and relevant information, the authors could therefore live among the Bisukha and Bidakho inhabitants to understand the economic practices and culture shared by the two communities. The data was collected through a secondary review of literature, oral interviews with the elders and Focused Group Discussions that engaged the people in the discourse on their environment and economic activities.³⁹ The study findings are further presented thematically through examination of repeat patterns in the people's points of view with regard to the topic.⁴⁰

Discussion of Findings

Colonial Land Tenure among the Bisukha and Bidakho between 1900-1963

The Europeans settled in Africa without considering the question of traditional land use, customs and beliefs. ⁴¹Their perception of the African

36. A. L. Cunliffe, and G. Karunanayake, "Working within hyphen-spaces in ethnographic research: Implications for research identities and practice," *Organizational Research Methods* 16, no. 3 (2013): 364-392.

37. J. K. S. Lee, and Kelvin Yu, "Corporate culture and organizational performance," *Journal of Managerial Psychology* (2004).

38. D. M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step-by-Step Guide* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2010).

39. Guadalupe X. Ayala, and John P. Elder, "Qualitative methods to ensure acceptability of behavioral and social interventions to the target population," *Journal of public health dentistry* 71 (2011): S69-S79.

40. V. Braun, and V. Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101.

41. J. Hopwood, "An inherited animus to communal land: the mechanisms of coloniality in land reform agendas in Acholiland, Northern Uganda," *Critical African Studies* 14, no. 1 (2022): 38-54.

environment was Western-oriented.⁴² According to Sindiga (1985), this perception did not concur with the traditional environmental perception.⁴³ Consequently, a conflict between traditional and Western perceptions emerged. Elders argued that European extension officers and the traditional agricultural practices failed to concur.⁴⁴

Similarly, Deschlippe (1956) argued that most of the far-reaching agrarian reforms undertaken were based on Western scientific reality.⁴⁵ This shows that there was virtually no harmonisation of the Western changes in the context of the traditional ecological milieu. The Europeans lacked insights regarding the local environment while enforcing Western ideas.⁴⁶ Therefore, the inability to incorporate local perceptions marked the drastic change in ecological setup among all societies that experienced colonialism.⁴⁷

Europeans did not consider the pre-colonial land tenure system and the underlying order of African land use. For example, the ideas of land control and conservation of the Bisukha and Bidakho were ignored, yet they were time-tested.⁴⁸ The pre-colonial land tenure was such that every household had automatic access to community and subsequent usufructuary rights. However, by 1912, communal ownership and usufructuary rights over land began to diminish as the colonial primitive accumulation that characterised land alienation and taxation became the order of the day. In the early years of the protectorate, it was assumed that Africans had no right to unoccupied land and that there was an undefined area of such waste land available for settlement.⁴⁹ Gazettement of the forests and the creation of the North Kavirondo reserve were rapidly inhibiting

42. M. Mawere, *Culture, indigenous knowledge and development in Africa: Reviving interconnections for Sustainable development* (Langaa RPCIG, 2014). Cf. S. H. Bholia, "Reclaiming old heritage for proclaiming future history: The knowledge-for-development debate in African contexts," *Africa Today* (2002): 3-21.

43. I. Sindiga, "The Use of Geography in Recent Historical Research in East Africa," *Trans-African Journal of African History* 14 (1985): 124-138.

44. FGD, Isukha Elders, at Chiefs Camp, Khayega Market on 5th May, 1995.

45. P. Deschlippe, *Shifting Cultivation in Africa: The Zande system of agriculture* (Routledge, 1956). See also, D. Niemeijer. "The dynamics of African agricultural history: is it time for a new development paradigm?" *Development and Change* 27, no. 1 (1996): 87-110.

46. K. Anderson, "'The beast within': Race, humanity, and animality," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18, no. 3 (2000): 301-320.

47. L. A. Kosinski (Ed.), *Ecological Disorder and Amazonian* (Rio de Janeiro: International Social Science Council, 1991). Cf. A. López. "Population Movements, Environmental change and Social conflicts in the Brazilian Amazon," in *Environmental Change and its Implications for Population Migration* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004), 145-163.

48. Cf. E. Mgaya, "Traditional institutions' management of sacred forests in Tanzania: history, narratives, and evidence from Njombe region, 1880s-2019," (2020).

49. E. Green, "Land concentration, institutional control and African agency: Growth," in *Agricultural Transformation in a Global History Perspective*, 247-270 (2013).

indigenous views. This was due to the fact that it was capitalistically fashioned to serve the interests of the invaders and to marginalise Africans.

Native Reserve, Taxation and Labour Recruitment

Land alienation and the creation of the North Kavirondo reserve affected the pre-colonial land use pattern. Marginal lands, especially river valleys, swampy places and slopes, were increasingly used. Unlike in the precolonial period, the individual could own land among other clans for cultivation, residence or pasture. This change in land tenure affected the customary practice of promoting proper land usage and other resources, as was the case before colonialism.⁵⁰ Therefore, it was evident that the colonial policies on land did not concur with the pre-colonial land use as it ushered in the concept of individualization and individual ownership of land and abolished communal ownership.⁵¹

By 1915, no more empty land could be acquired and occupied freely. This was the genesis of land commoditisation in Isukha and Idakho. Its value was changed to produce commodities supplied to the new capitalist markets. As the demand for cereals increased, there was no room for shifting cultivation as African peasant farmers tilled their land throughout the year. This demand reduced the total area for crop rotation and fallow land.⁵² By 1945, the fallow periods, empty land and village bushes had virtually disappeared.

Taxation and forced labour were hindrances to the old economic set-up. They were potent instruments that the colonial government wielded.⁵³ In 1901, a tax of two rupees was imposed to raise revenue, thereby making people work to raise the tax. These measures destroyed the 'traditional' family lineages and kinship ties. Gender roles also changed as women took on the roles performed by men.⁵⁴

50. E. D. Ault, and Gilbert L. Rutman, "The development of individual rights to property in tribal Africa," *The Journal of Law and Economics* 22, no. 1 (1979): 163-182.

51. Peter Ahindikha (Retired Education officer), Oral Interview, at his home in Machilifu- Khayega, on 10th May, 1995.

52. N. Humphrey, *The Liguru and the Land: Sociological Aspects of Some Agricultural Problems of North Kavirondo* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1947), 37. Cf. L. E. Crowley, and E. C. Simon, "Agrarian change and the changing relationships between toil and soil in Maragoli, Western Kenya (1900-1994)," *Human Ecology* 28, no. 3 (2000): 383-414.

53. B. O'Laughlin, "Proletarianisation, agency and changing rural livelihoods: forced labour and resistance in colonial Mozambique," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 28, no. 3 (2002): 511-530.

54. R. M. A. Van Zwanenberg, and A. King, *An Economic History of Kenya and Uganda 1800-1970* (Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1975). Cf. Van Zwanenberg and King, "Nomadic pastoralism: The process of impoverishment," in *An Economic History of Kenya and Uganda 1800-1970* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1975), 79-109.

Likewise, the elders who used to decide who owned the land were subordinated and accommodated in the colonial economic system. The role of the chief and elders was transferred to the District Commissioner (DC), who knew very little about the traditional lineages and kinship related to the land.⁵⁵ Most of the DC's resolutions in land cases often caused problems. Sons or relatives of the same kinship could fight over land boundaries. The elders had no control of resources, accessibility and utility of land and livestock. Instead, the elders had to work hard to collect taxes, recruit the labour force and force people to attend catechumenal classes. Their traditional roles with regard to land tenure were systematically eroded.

The system was further watered down with the introduction of the native courts after World War I.⁵⁶ The native and tribunal courts took over the role of the elders in dispensing legal and juridical matters. Most of the members of the tribunal courts were 'collaborators' or friendly to the colonial administration. Their decision always had to favour the interests of the master. According to Esese (1990), the displacement of the *Liguru* and the elders as the supreme land authorities and their replacement by colonial-appointed chiefs and headmen was part of the subordination process where pre-colonial structures were preserved but modified to serve the new capitalist system.⁵⁷ After the inter-war period, other changes like land title deeds and land demarcation were affected to avoid wars or skirmishes over boundaries between Isukha and Idakho. This ushered in individual land ownership by 1930.

Changes in Farming, Cropping and Technology

Before colonialism, Africans had relied on mixed subsistence farming. However, colonialists looked at mixed subsistence farming as a careless, muddled-up farming technique in the colonial epoch. Colonial demands, especially in the inter-war period, made Bisukha and Bidakho plant more maize to pay taxes.⁵⁸ Maize had to be planted in lines and as a mono-cultural crop. Most farms used no crop rotation and manuring because people had small land parcels, and it was hard to get manure as most of the animals were either taken as booty or killed by cattle diseases or droughts. The colonial regime attributed this

55. Parker Shipton, "Lineage and locality as antithetical principles in East African systems of land tenure," *Ethnology* 23, no. 2 (1984): 117-132.

56. Samuel Mwisiayi (Retired Sub Chief of Shinyalu), Oral Interview at his home in Likhovero, on 4th April, 1995.

57. Esese, *Agriculture and Socio-Economic Change among the Wanga of Mumias Division, 1860-1945*, 1990. Cf. Esese, *The changing system of land ownership and its socio-economic effects in Lugari Division, western province of Kenya, c. 1880-2000* (Michigan State University, 2009), 28.

58. Hopley, *Op.Cit.*

situation to a lack of skills and consequently developed policies and coercive measures to enforce environmental management and soil conservation.

Shifting cultivation which had greatly dominated African societies, declined systematically because of colonial restrictions, land alienation and an increase in population.⁵⁹ Colonial land ordinances of 1902 and 1915, in a way, declared a death sentence on shifting cultivation. People were prohibited from adventuring into virgin lands that were already declared crown lands. Therefore, the decline of shifting cultivation meant a loss of soil fertility as the same land was utilised for a long time without rest. Another factor that contributed to the deterioration of shifting cultivation was the fact that the colonial government viewed shifting cultivation as wasteful and embarked on a process of re-organising both the system of agriculture and land tenure system that could be economically profiting as they needed food and raw materials.⁶⁰

In some areas where shifting cultivation could be performed, the fallow periods became shorter due to the constant subdivision of land among the sons.⁶¹ Food requirements for the gold miners and the growing maize and simsim for World Wars I and II soldiers could not allow the pre-colonial fallow period and shifting cultivation to continue. These crops were grown on a large scale since their demand was relatively high.

Crop rotation and inter-cropping, which had maintained soil fertility in pre-colonial periods, were no longer easily workable options. According to colonial extension officers, inter-cropping minimized the farm output of maize.⁶² Thus, they preferred mono-cropping.⁶³ Inter-cropping's balancing effect on soil nutrients was obliterated with the abandonment of the practice. For instance, the cover crops used to prevent soil erosion and maintain soil moisture were not allowed to be grown on the same plot as maize or simsim. Population increases also meant the need for more land to produce enough food. As such, pressure on agricultural land reduced the total area for crop rotation and fallow land.⁶⁴ In this case, it was not only a change in colonial land tenure due to its policies but a combination of colonial strategies and demographic changes that exerted pressure on land. Alongside this pressure, a new mode of production evolved to accommodate the changing economic scenario.

59. R. P. Neumann, "The postwar conservation boom in British colonial Africa. *Environmental History*," 7, no. 1 (2002): 22-47.

60. S. Sen, and M. C. Marcuzzo (Eds.), *The changing face of imperialism: colonialism to contemporary capitalism* (Taylor & Francis, 2018). Cf. S. Sen. "Could Britain Continue with the Gold Standard in Absence of Colonial India?," *Review of Political Economy* (2022): 1-14.

61. Humphrey, *Op. Cit.*

62. S. M. Omwoyo, *The Agricultural Changes in the Kipsigis Land, c. 1894-1963: An Historical Inquiry* (Kenya University, 2002).

63. Joseph M. Malusu (Lecturer at Kenya University), Oral Interview at his house in KU, Senegal street, on 6th August, 1995.

64. Humphrey, *Op.Cit.*

Individual land ownership also led to the disappearance of "Empty lands" that existed for the community to acquire or occupy freely. By 1935, it was very difficult to see empty tracts of land as most of them had become crown land or surveyed and registered as individual parcels. The disappearance of communal land meant resources for pastures, bushes, good soils, forests, and relief lands. The colonialists did not like communal resources, especially for the pasture and growing of sweet potatoes and cassava. They claimed overgrazing and soil erosion resulted in the ecological degradation of such land. Most of their areas were turned into self-sustenance and increased commodity production, particularly coffee. This accounted for the decline in the production of sweet potatoes and cassava in the colonial period as the interest shifted towards maize, simsim and other cash crops. This decline later contributed to food shortages and famines.

The creation of the North Kavirondo Reserves after World War I increased the use of marginal lands in Isukha and Idakho. More people began tilling the empty lands along the swamps, rivers and bushes to increase production for the family requirements.⁶⁵ The pre-colonial administration regulations over the ownership and use of the land had seen their last days as they were transferred to colonial land officers under the chairmanship of the DC.

Colonial land laws made Africans be denied their rights over land. The land and labour ordinances gave more attention to the demands of the colonialists than the indigenous people.⁶⁶ This concurs with other observations that, amidst increasing land shortages, peasant farmers were forced to plant maize on steep slopes. The cultivation of such fragile land portrayed women as land miners, insensitive to or unwilling to adopt improved methods of agriculture.⁶⁷

Accompanying colonial land tenure changes were colonial agricultural technology. For the colonialists to obtain what they required in terms of food and raw materials, they had to alter the Bisukha-Bidakho pre-colonial farm implements and the farming technology as a whole. In this alteration, some pre-colonial farm implements were modified, and others were neglected or discarded. This is yet another way through which pre-colonial strategies and technology were integrated into the capitalist mode of production in Isukha and Idakho as was elsewhere.

65. Peter Ahindikha (Retired Education officer), Oral Interview, at his home in Machilifu-Khayega, on 10th May, 1995.

66. Tuck, E., M. McKenzie, and K. McCoy, "Land education: Indigenous, post-colonial, and decolonizing perspectives on place and environmental education research," *Environmental Education Research* 20, no. 1 (2014): 1-23.

67. T. Kanogo, *Squatters and Roots of Mau, 1905-63* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1987), 12. Cf. Benjamin Cashore, Fred Gale, Errol Meidinger, and Deanna Newsom, "Forest certification in developing and transitioning countries: part of a sustainable future?" *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 48, no. 9 (2006): 6-25.

Colonial agricultural technology improved food production, especially during the inter-war period and after for feeding and supporting the countries back at home and for the soldiers. Thus, there was a need for agricultural production tools, especially iron hoes, ox-ploughs and cut-lasses. It is argued that these tools proved to be very versatile in the farm products as they exhausted the soil to increase agricultural output.⁶⁸

The colonialists stimulated the demand for their tools as their pieces of advice glorified them. This was done through colonial agricultural officers who advised the African cultivators to use iron hoes and ox-ploughs to increase production. It does not mean that the pre-colonial wooden hoe, amid digging sticks, disappeared from the scene completely. They were still used primarily in weeding but on a small scale. The requirements on the colonial market in terms of food were so high that digging sticks (*Biloho*) and wooden hoes could not cope.⁶⁹

The most valued tool was the ox-plough for it could work or break a large piece of land compared to other tools. Ox-plough arrived in 1925.⁷⁰ However, even though it led to more food production, it had adverse ecological effects. For instance, in Idakho, among the Abamusaali and Abashimuli, more virgin lands were ploughed; hence a lot of vegetation was destroyed, leading to the environment's vulnerability.⁷¹ Also, the ploughing did not remove all the grass as the hoe had been doing. Grass on farms increased, and that also lowered production.⁷² It appears that the people had not mastered the use of the ox-plough. That is why grass could grow after a short time.

According to some respondents, particularly the provincial administrators, it was believed that higher yields of maize could be achieved on ploughed virgin land for a year or two.⁷³ However, wind or heavy rain could gradually take away the soil. Maize, too, would exhaust soil fertility.⁷⁴ The plough gained its roots in Isukha and Idakho due to population increase, and commercial demand for maize became a staple food. Other food crops were ignored or declined in demand, and the colonial administrator actively promoted the production of maize. The introduction of the plough meant forests were to be cleared and the

68. Shiamala Liseche (peasant Farmer), Oral Interview at his home Mukumu Boys on 10th April, 1995.

69. FGD, Isukha Elders, at Chiefs Camp, Khayega Market on 5th May, 1995.

70. Aliavikali Dongolo (Village elder and Herbalist), Oral Interview at his home Ilala on 7th July, 1995.

71. Joseph Mabilia (Elder among the Idakho/ Herbalist), Oral Interview at his home in Shirumba, on 8th July, 1995.

72. Shiamala Liseche (Peasant Farmer), Oral Interview at his home Mukumu Boys on 10th April, 1995.

73. Samuel Imbwaga, Samuel Mwisiayi and Hudson Shitambasi (Provincial administrators), Oral Interview at Shinyalu Market on 3rd August, 1995.

74. Donald Museti & Shiamala Liseche (Peasant Farmers), Oral Interview at Khayega on 4th June, 1995.

land brought under crops.⁷⁵ Thus, it is estimated that by 1943, Bisukha had 85 ploughs while Bidakho had 54 ploughs.⁷⁶ Although the number seems to be small by that time they were in high demand, one plough could serve an area under one *Liguru*, approximately 10 square kilometres.⁷⁷

The preceding finding on the plough in Bisukha and Bidakho concurs with the results of Bowles (1976) that ploughing in North Nyanza crumbled the soil, exposed it to wind erosion, and encouraged the peasant to plough a large area than he could adequately plant and protect.⁷⁸ In addition, oxen for pulling the heavy ploughs needed large amounts of grazing, which merely added to the overgrazing problem in the area under attention. Thus, compared to the traditional tools like the digging sticks, iron hoe and mattock which tended to manipulate individual plants rather than the entire surface, the use of the plough contributed substantially to the high rate of soil erosion. Various soil layers were haphazardly mixed as the new tools ploughed deeper than the sticks and hoes.

It is believed that the Chui plough (popularly known as *Mshika-Kamba*) reached the area from the TransNzoia side, where the whites from South Africa had settled, following Sir Charles Eliot's invitation in 1902. Iron hoes gradually replaced wooden hoes and sticks. Most respondents agree that the plough was first introduced after World War I about 1925-1929.⁷⁹ Its influence in the area might have been popularized by migrant labourers and the colonial agricultural officers who glorified their technology. In a nutshell, the coming and use of the ox-plough began a revolution in land use and production patterns in Isukha and Idakho. The ploughs arrived at the chief's camp and then at the *Balugongo* homes (Assistant Chiefs). For instance, the first plough in the area reached Shivachi, Mwinamo and Makong'o who were then leaders of the Isukha and Idakho.⁸⁰

Gold Mining and Land Tenure

The land was alienated for the schools, mission stations, and public works, like roads, and in the 1930s, areas that seemed to have gold were also alienated. Wagner reported that 65,000 acres of native land had been required for mining

75. Humphrey, *Op. Cit.*, 27.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Shiamala Liseche (peasant Farmer), Oral Interview at his home Mukumu Boys on 10th April, 1995.

78. B. D. Bowles, "Peasant Production and Underdevelopment: The Case of Colonial Kenya," *The African Review* 6, no. 2 (1976): 1-35.

79. Samuel Mwisiayi, Siamala Liseche & Aliavikali Dongolo, Oral Interview on 3rd May, 1995.

80. Samuel Mwisiayi (Retired Sub Chief- Shinyalu sublocation), Oral Interview at his home in Likhovero on 4th April, 1995

purposes, especially during the first few years after the gold-field discovery caused considerable anxiety among the native population.⁸¹

This land issue played a dominant role in the unfolding pattern of African political consciousness in North Kavirondo. The discovery of gold in the district in 1931 and the subsequent miniature gold rush stimulated the formation of the North Kavirondo Central Association, also known as the Abaluyia Central Association. In 1934, Jomo Kenyatta also complained to the colonial office in London about the alienation of the 'native' lands in Kakamega.⁸² The alienation of the Kakamega land for gold prospecting completely changed the hitherto pre-capitalist land tenure system. Anxiety among family members that they would be evicted to the overcrowded reserves increased. Some of the gold fields were initially used as pasture land, which meant usufructuary rights in such places were no more. Many people dashed to the mines to seek wage labour to earn money for the family upkeep and to pay taxes.

There were some socio-economic, political and ecological effects due to gold mining. As various communities settled and intermarried, cultural fusion was evident. Political consciousness among the North Kavirondo people also rose as they championed the return of the alienated lands. There was frequent trouble between the white miners and Africans. In September 1933, the DC of Kakamega reported that:

The Bisukha and Bidakho have again been upset, apparently by irresponsible threats of subordinate Europeans that when leases are granted, they will have to clear out by losing their lands".⁸³

Alienation of land among the Bisukha and Bidakho meant agricultural land shrunk, and agricultural production declined. By 1934, most of the cereal or foods for sale at Kakamega market were brought by Kabras, Batsotso, Marama and Tachoni. It appears that the Bisukha and Bidakho concentrated more on mining at the expense of subsistence farming. As energetic labour joined the mining companies, family or household labour was weakened, thus the families could not produce enough food for themselves. That is why the little earnings of the people from the mines were used to purchase food for the families from the Kabras and Batsotso people at the Kakamega market.

On the other hand, the environment suffered a big blow. Mining companies were given royalties to extract timber from the Kakamega forest, which was

81. G. Wagner, *The Bantu of North Kavirondo* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 10. Cf. J. J. de Wolf, "The diffusion of age-group organization in East Africa: a reconsideration," *Africa* 50, no. 3 (1980): 305-310.

82. B. Berman, "Ethnography as politics, politics as ethnography: Kenyatta, Malinowski, and the making of Facing Mount Kenya," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/ La Revue canadienne des études africaines* 30, no. 3 (1996): 313-344.

83. Personal communication, DC, 1933 September.

highly required in the mines as poles for pit props. Thus, the mining industry gave rise to many forest problems, which at the time damaged the conservation strategies of the colonial government. Trees were cut with less replacement. A large area occupied by the Bisukha and Bidakho suffered from land dereliction, destruction of the vegetation in mining areas, and interference with marine life, especially along rivers Yala and Isiukhu, due to water pollution. This meant that the mining area ceased to be agriculturally viable for a couple of years. The scars left by mining companies are still spread all over; to date, they are associated with deadly poisonous gases.

Another hazard caused by gold mining in the area was the prevalence of the malarial disease. Due to digging holes that kept stagnant pools of water, the breeding of mosquitoes increased. The Colonial Kakamega Medical Officer reported that:

Malaria is on the increase. It is impossible with the present staff to exercise adequate control against malaria in the vast goldfield area. It is impossible to control mosquitoes breeding correctly in and around the Kakamega Township.⁸⁴

Mining also created conditions for breeding tsetse flies that affected both people and livestock. A number of people died due to collapsing mines or due to diseases related to mining activities. Diseases, like scurvy, diarrhea and asthma were rampant.⁸⁵ The Bisukha and Bidakho were advised to plant blue gum trees extensively for sale as pit props for the mines. This was yet another environmental problem. Most of the gum trees were grown near rivers and swampy areas. The potential of gum trees to exhaust the soil and water is excellent compared to the indigenous trees. Therefore, planting gum trees led to the swamps' shrinkage and a decline in soil quality. Also, as the gum trees grew faster, the indigenous trees in such areas could not compete with them.

The only survivors were creeping plants that could climb on the gum trees. Otherwise, the others faded away. Gum trees had little use compared to some mentioned indigenous trees like *Mukumu* or *Siala*. The gum tree had no medicinal value and could not be used for sacrifices. Thus, its role in the ecology of the Bisukha and Bidakho was limited only to timber, firewood and pit props.

Mining in this area also led to a flourishing business in Kakamega. Food was brought from all over Buluyia to be sold at Kakamega. The Indians benefitted quite a lot as they sold commodities ranging from matchboxes to super cigarettes. By 1936, Kakamega was bustling with life, which led to the expansion of Kakamega town in the colonial period.⁸⁶ Although gold mining increased native

84. KNA:PC/NZA/3/1/44/193.

85. Athanas Miheso (Former Councilor of Isukha Central), Oral Interview 6th June, 1995.

86. Athanas Miheso (Former Councilor of Isukha Central), Oral Interview 6th June, 1995.

wealth due to employment, at the end of the activity, the Bisukha and Bidakho remained in a state of poverty and alienation mainly because the little money earned from gold mines was channeled into the domestic purchase of food and personal subsistence and not for investment. Instead, the mining companies grew more affluent and prosperous, and the profits were repatriated back to the metropolis.⁸⁷

Economy, Population and Ecology in Colonial Isukha and Idakho before 1963

Closely related to colonial intrusion was the increasing population which systematically reduced the land carrying capacity. Population expansion has been considered essential for agricultural change under subsistence conditions.⁸⁸ According to her, an increasing population causes food shortages and forces man to intensify his efforts through technological innovations and longer work hours. The agricultural development that ensues is adopting new methods that make more intensive land use possible through soil conservation, irrigation system and fertilisation. For instance, with time, the Bisukha introduced perennial crops such as cassava and practised many devices that helped them maintain the fertility of the soil before the arrival of the colonialists.

Thus, demographic changes facilitated economic change. First, the rising population pressured ecology, where trees treated as sacred and traditionally preserved were now cut. More so, places hitherto respected, like those where people were buried (*Mwilindwa*), were no longer reserved as people wanted more land for settlement. Even the feared forests were penetrated for land, firewood or fruits.⁸⁹

A lot of pressure was exerted on fallow and empty land. Gradually, the no-man's land between the two clans began to diminish. Even family lands are reduced in size.⁹⁰ This increase in population density might have been caused by individualization of land and polygamous life improved life through better medical attention. By 1930, the mortality rates had decreased following colonial medications to eradicate killer diseases that had hitherto claimed many children.

87. W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Nairobi: East Africa Publishing House. Routledge, 1972). See also, C. M. Kusimba, "Archaeology of slavery in East Africa," *African Archaeological Review* 21, no. 2 (2004): 59-88.

88. E. Boserup, *Population and Technological Change: A Study of long-term Trends* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). Cf. W. F. Ruddiman, and C. E. Ellis, "Effect of per-capita land use changes on Holocene forest clearance and CO₂ emissions," *Quaternary Science Reviews* 28, no. 27-28 (2009): 3011-3015.

89. Joseph M. Malusu (Lecturer at Kenyatta University), Oral Interview at his house in KU, Senegal street, on 6th August, 1995.

90. Aseka, *The Colonial Economy During and After the Second World War and Political Activities in Buluyia*, 1989.

Therefore, as much as we blame the capitalist mode of production, shifting cultivation was transformed into a highly destructive form of settled agriculture with an increase in population. The practice was possible when the population was relatively small, and the land was spacious and available for use. However, increasing population meant that public land was utilized and the eventual reduction of food production.

Furthermore, the Western influence intensified negative pressure on the complex relationship between cultural, ecological, and economic factors. The missionaries despised some aspects of culture, especially the belief system. The Christian values did not favor the respect hitherto accorded to burial sites, sacred trees, animals and taboos. As such traditional cultures were eroded, the economy became unstable, and the ecology became vulnerable because the link was broken.⁹¹ This does not mean that colonial intrusion was the genesis of ecological imbalances or that those traditional practices were a panacea to ecological balance and maintenance. The fact is that ecological imbalance has been around because man has interacted with the environment since the early ages. However, the colonial intrusion was one of the significant factors that accelerated the processes of ecological destruction in the periphery.⁹²

As elsewhere, the colonialists arrived in Africa and other peripheral states with heaven-storming plans and policies, which did not put the interests and the knowledge of the colonised at the centre.⁹³ They virtually ignored the knowledge the Africans had acquired over the years as they interacted with the environment. This formed the point of disarticulation in ecological maintenance in Isukha and Idakho. With the infiltration of the colonialists, the Isukha and Idakho people were no longer in command of their destiny or in control of what used to be shared resources. For this matter, the traditional authorities lost control over resource allocation, equity and ability to determine the future economy of their societies due to destructive conditions imposed by external powers.

The indigenous ecological knowledge did not disappear at once. It continued, albeit with frustrations from colonial masters. There was also political confusion and a struggle for independence. Christianity confused people in relation to ecological knowledge, but it had to continue secretly. With time, colonial entrenchment led to the systematic erosion of this knowledge as indigenous thinking capacity was articulated in the new capitalist mode of production.

91. Cf. Robert A. Voeks, *Sacred leaves of Candomblé: African magic, medicine, and religion in Brazil* (University of Texas Press, 2010).

92. Aseka, *Op.Cit.*

93. OSSREA, "Application of OSSREA," *Social Sciences Research Review*, 10, no. 2 (1994), 6. See also, W. M. K. Mwafongo, "Land use change and land degradation in West Malombe, Mangochi District, Malawi: a geographical study," *Malawi Journal of Science and Technology* 4 (1998): 13-36.

The conflict between indigenous ecological knowledge and the new Western knowledge was evident in 1931 when a renowned rainmaker from the Abatsunga clan called Lukholo "stopped" rain because a man from the Abakhaywa clan owed her a cow. Severe drought followed. Lukholo Shilisia was a renowned rainmaker. She inherited this knowledge from her parents, who were rainmakers. She attracted the rains by going to a sacred place where she waved her ritual "stick" (stuff) with the thicker end. In addition, she boiled herbal medicine in four large pots to which she added the ash (*Likoshe*) of burnt thatching grass. If the brew boiled over, then the rain would come. In case the rainmaker was annoyed by the people and wanted to stop the rain, she would dip her "stick" with its thin end in the pot and then turn this end to the sky. There would be no rain if the stick were kept in the position. When people wanted to appease an angry rainmaker and get rain, they would bring presents until she was conciliated and turned the staff around, which produced the desired results. The D.C., Mr Anderson, disputed that a person could stop the rain. To him, droughts were normal environmental occurrences. However, Chief Jeremiah Sechero advised the man from the Abakhaywa clan to pay the debt he owed to Lukholo. The Oral account explains that:

When the man failed to pay, the chief advised D.C. to intervene in Lukholo's case. As if to experiment, D.C. gave Lukholo one hundred shillings, and to his dismay, there was a heavy downpour in Kakamega town, just two hours after he had given the money. In this instance, Lukholo proved that African beliefs and practices had power. Henceforth, rainmakers gained respect, and it seems that Lukholo was the last knowledgeable rainmaker among the Bisukha. After her, rainmaking as an institution systematically diminished as people embraced the Western lifestyle and Christian values.⁹⁴

Practices that persisted were, for example, the dependence on traditional medicinal plants for the treatment of both animals and humans. Indigenous ecological knowledge continued because the majority could not afford the colonial treatment method.⁹⁵ Traditional healing was hereditary and was part of appeasing the ancestors.⁹⁶ The Bisukha and Bidakho were deeply rooted in their culture and found it challenging to de-link from it. Again, ecological knowledge persisted because there was a lack of confidence in what the Europeans offered. However, it persisted amidst strong opposition from the church. Elsewhere, some societies took it as a bone of contention to start independent churches for example among the Agikuyu.

94. Samuel Imbwaga, Samuel Mwisaiyi and Hudson Shitambasi (Provincial administrators), Oral Interview at Shinyalu Market on 3rd August, 1995

95. Joseph M. Malusu (Lecturer at Kenyatta University), Oral Interview at his house in KU, Senegal street, on 6th August, 1995.

96. Ibid.

European versus African Perception of Economy and the Breakdown of the Belief Systems between c. 1900-1963

Human beings everywhere develop some views about the environment in which they live or visit. In Sindiga's (1985) opinion, these views influence their behaviour on the land and dictate how they use the resources.⁹⁷ Thus, in the back of the mind of the colonialists, the exploitation of African resources for home industries was a driving factor. This perception dictated the economic mechanisms that were put in place for such ends.⁹⁸

The pre-colonial Bisukha and Bidakho perceptions of the environment and its resources were dictated by the abundance of resources in their ecological milieu. The population was less than the available resources, which is why it was easy to practise shifting cultivation or migratory farming as the land was in abundance. Such land parcels were given a minimum of four to six-years rest to recover or rejuvenate their fertility level. However, as the population rose, this perception or approach too began changing.

Before the arrival of the Europeans, there was the likelihood that farmland's resting period had reduced from six seasons of rest to three seasons maximum, a pointer to shrinking land. However, these changes went on slowly at a controlled pace. Again, it was not automatic that the shifting period was three seasons for all families. Some families continued to keep the five years pattern for a long time, while others, due to socio-economic and demographic changes, had to change from five to three or two years. Therefore, decisions and activities of any given moment can be interpreted by understanding the time's perceived resources.

Agricultural technology evolved gradually as the perception and conceptualization of the environment by Bisukha and Bidakho changed. The use of digging sticks appears to have dominated the Abisukha and Bidakho in the period before the arrival of the Arabs and the Swahili. Using digging sticks and fire-hardened hoes meant that small portions of land had to be tilled.

However, it is dubious that digging sticks could provide enough food for the household. By the 1870s, ironworking was not popular in the agricultural sector compared to its use in the military. Hunting and gathering animals, roots, leaves and fruits were an important economic mainstay activity.⁹⁹ With time the rising population dictated a change in the people's perceptions. They had to increase food, which meant a difference in farming technology.

97. Sindiga, "The Use of Geography in Recent Historical Research in East Africa," 1985, 124-138.

98. Cf. Suisheng Zhao, "A neo-colonialist predator or development partner? China's engagement and rebalance in Africa," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 90 (2014): 1033-1052.

99. Ochieng and Maxon, *An economic history of Kenya*, 1992.

On the eve of the Arab-Swahili arrival, Bisukha and Bidakho had acquired the iron hoe culture, which went side by side with the digging sticks. The respondents reckoned that iron hoes were good at breaking a large piece of land and mixing the soil.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, the digging sticks (*Biloho*) were utilized in weeding finger millet, sorghum and other cereals. It, therefore, appears that the digging sticks disappeared gradually. Even during the colonial period, sticks were used in some areas until they were gradually phased out from the scene with the introduction of new agricultural implements.

The cultural background of the pioneer European settlers influenced them to use the land for purposes familiar to them. For instance, the colonialist administrator saw everything in an African setting through the European eye, hence, underestimating the skills and adaptability of the Africans to new concepts and practices.¹⁰¹

The reports taken back to the metropolis by David Livingstone, Sir Henry Johnstone, Joseph Thomson and a number of missionaries, travellers and explorers gave leading information about the wealth of Africa in terms of resources.¹⁰² Given that these explorers-cum-missionaries had been nurtured in the industrializing Europe, they had a role of opening up a "siphoning pipe" between the periphery and the metropolis, mainly to supply raw materials and labour to the industries back at home.

Firstly, there was a conflict in land use between traditional Bisukha and Bidakho agricultural practices and the Europeans. Colonial agrarian reforms were undertaken - land privatization, cash crops, land title deeds, exotic animals and plant breeds. These reforms did not take off successfully because of a lack of knowledge of the environmental perceptions of the African cultivators and herders.

Secondly, European administrators, miners and missionaries began operations in Isukha and Idakho without considering the African environmental perceptions and strategies. Instead, African ethnography was undermined in articulating African modes of production. For example, the local perceptions of the fauna and flora did not have meaning before the colonialists.¹⁰³ They imposed

100. Paul Liyayi (Peasant Farmer), Oral Interview at his home in Ivagale on 16th June, 1995.

101. A. Kariro, and C. Juma (Eds.), *Gaining Ground: Institutional Innovations in Land use Management in Kenya* (Rev. Edn.) (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991), 23. Cf. P. Shipton, "Land and culture in tropical Africa: soils, symbols, and the metaphysics of the mundane," *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1994): 347-377.

102. C. Harvie, and C. Matthew, *Nineteenth-century Britain: a very short introduction* (OUP Oxford, 2000). And see also, D. M. Peers, "Britain and empire," *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2004): 53-78.

103. H. Englund, and J. Leach, "Ethnography and the meta-narratives of modernity," *Current anthropology* 41, no. 2 (2000): 225-248.

economic mechanisms to exploit the resources leading to the occurrence of famines.

Conflicting perceptions over land tenure were also witnessed. Before colonialism, each land formed a single, continuous territory and was held by individual clans for instance Abitsende, Abashimuli, and Abamilonje among others. The colonialists had a different perception that all along did not favour communal ownership. Following the land ordinances of 1915 and 1918, clan territories were dissolved, potential areas were alienated for crown projects, and others were given to the missionaries to set up churches and schools.¹⁰⁴

Life in the North Kavirondo reserve was further altered with the discovery of gold.¹⁰⁵ By 1931, the crown alienated land for gold mines without regard for the African land tenure system. In the Bisukha and Bidakho land tenure system, the underlying order of land usage and the resources therein were capitalistically incorporated. Indirectly, the demand for taxes acted as a spur to push the people into the labour market.

Change in crop production also occurred, with the traditional crops like sorghum, millet, and finger-millet supplemented by other varieties of sweet potatoes, bananas and various vegetable types losing prominence as maize growing was emphasised at their expense. According to Rodney (1972), the colonialists emphasised maize production because it provided more kilo joules, thus more energy than any other cereal.¹⁰⁶ Maize also generated more income than other cereals in the colony.¹⁰⁷ Other economic changes were brought through the government policies, demographic changes and the enterprise of Asian middlemen in Kakamega town. These external factors and the changing Isukha-Idakho perception led to a diversified economy. However, this diversification had the purpose of serving the interests of the colonial master. These abrupt changes took place steadily depending on the situation in the world market and the demands of the metropole industries.

104. A. I. Fridah, *The Changing Patterns of Land-Use Among the Kabras of Kakamega County, Kenya C. 1963-2010* (Kenyatta University, 2021).

105. J. MacArthur, "When did the Luyia (or any other group) become a tribe?" *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines* 47, no. 3 (2013): 351-363; Priscilla M. Shilaro, "Colonial land policies: the Kenya Land Commission and the Kakamega gold rush, 1932-4," in *Historical Studies and Social Change in Western Kenya: Essays in Memory of Professor Gideon S. Were* (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 2002), 110-128.

106. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 1972. Cf. G. Arrighi, and S. S. John, "Socialism and economic development in tropical Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 6, no. 2 (1968): 141-169.

107. Ainsworth, *Pioneer Kenya Administrator 1864-1946*, 1955. And see also, Ochieng, "Western Kenya," in *Historical Studies and Social Change in Western Kenya: Essays in Memory of Professor Gideon S. Were* (2002): 181-201.

The Abisukha-Abidakho perception of labour was different from the colonialists' perception. In traditional Isukha and Idakho, labour was mobilised for different types of work, such as clearing bushes, hut construction, threshing millet, corporate hunting and other communal activities. With the advent of colonialism, the African perception could not hold. Instead, labour was highly needed, a fact which caused its commoditization to serve the interests of the colonialists. People were regularly used as porters on crown projects, mines, or white farms. The movement of labour that was non-existent in the pre-colonial era became a reality. Recruitment agents for European farmers befriended or bribed African chiefs and some headmen to forcibly recruit their subjects into "wage labour" on white farms, particularly after World War I.¹⁰⁸

The colonial perception of forests and trees, in general, was exploitative. They took over the responsibility of the African forests as crown property. They also enacted laws to control the forests with claims of protecting the catchment area. However, research has revealed that serious forest exploitation went on regarding timber provision for commercial purposes. The Asian companies invaded the forests and began cutting indigenous trees using heavy machines for export and use in the mines.¹⁰⁹

The gazettement of Kakamega Forest in 1933 limited how people utilised forests, especially for food purposes. As the population increased, there was no more virgin land for expansion. Instead, overcrowding on inherited parcels of land increased. The gazettement, aimed at conserving wild biota, caused many problems. A total of 237,773 square kilometres of land, which both Abisukha and the neighbouring Tiriki depended on, was lost.¹¹⁰ The gazettement ignored the traditional management of biodiversity and necessitated the eviction of the local people who resided in the forest then.

Despite the gazettement, people continued utilizing the resources illegally. This meant that as they exploited the forests, they did not put conservation at the core of their action. The Europeans also came up with exotic trees such as eucalyptus, pines and cypress, which were and have not been favorable to the water and the soil as these trees consume a lot of soil moisture and nutrients. Thus, colonialism did not aim to preserve the forests they claimed but to extract them as part of their imperialistic agenda.

Through the "civilizing" mission, humanitarianism and philanthropism, the colonialists used Western Education and Christianity to prepare grounds for eliminating cultural practices inhibiting their operations in Africa. In this regard, the two were used as colonial tools to dismantle rigid beliefs. Taboos that acted as

108. Shiamala Liseche (peasant Farmer), Oral Interview at his home Mukumu Boys on 10th April, 1995.

109. Joseph Mabia (Elder among the Idakho/ Herbalist), Oral Interview at his home in Shirumba, on 8th July, 1995.

110. Z. A. Ogutu, and M. Khayesi, "Culture as the basis of Bio-diversity Conservation in Kakamega Forest," *Trans African Journal of History* 24 (1995): 195-204.

regulators of the socio-economic and political behaviour were tampered with. Bisukha and Bidakho believed in *Nyasaye* (God), who was seen in the form of fauna and flora. With the commoditization of the fauna and flora, this manifestation was not upheld. Instead, the people were to understand God through the Bible and not merely in plants and animals. The fear people had regarding the sacred trees and animals began to disappear. The wrath of the ancestors on the societal deviants was no longer applicable. Thus, gradually, the Bisukha-Bidakho traditional religious practices that ensured harmony in production in an ecological milieu were progressively sacrificed at the altar of the Western religion. The African catechists and the early converts began to abandon their beliefs and strove to live as western religion instructed them. As a result, some looked at traditional medicine and practices with less respect and suspicion.¹¹¹

Beliefs, totems and taboos related to crops and plants were heavily criticized for casting aside. With the integration of the area into the capitalist market, women performed some roles which were not meant for them. This confusion in gender roles was accentuated when male folks left their household for wage labour and joined the Kings African Rifles. The female folk took over their role in cultural practices and belief systems.

The missionaries encouraged women to do away with beliefs and taboos related to chicken and eggs. Women and children were prevented from eating chicken and eggs in the pre-colonial era. According to the respondents, this was a strategy to economise domestic resources. Although, as mentioned before, the Arabs and Swahili traders had tried to tamper with this practice, its final crash was in the colonial era. In 1919 Chilson wrote that:

There is a custom among the natives which forbids a woman to eat chicken. Recently this has become a test of a woman's willingness to "Leave all" for her saviour (Jesus Christ) ... a sign that she has broken all customs.¹¹²

Conclusion

The colonialists had external and 'bio spherical' perceptions, which did not consider the African ecological interests. In the process of articulation, the external socio-economic interests were pinned on the Bisukha and Bidakho without due consideration to their ways of life in terms of harnessing resources and, at the same time, conserving their biodiversity. Thus, the external dominance and internal dependence created a situation that inevitably transformed the

111. Peter Ahindukha (Retired Education officer), Oral Interview, at his home in Machilifu-Khayega, on 10th May, 1995.

112. KNA, EAYME 164/80, 1919.

colonised's socio-economic fabric to the newcomers' advantage.¹¹³ Europeans believed everything they did in terms of medicine, land alienation, destocking, religion, education, dressing, mining and extraction of forests was the best. They did not give room to the African perceptions unless it was to perpetuate their socioeconomic motives. The external perceptions caused societal distortion in terms of economic and belief systems.

The external forces dominated society at the expense of those familiar with it and had a long experience and mastery over their environment. The findings revealed that the pre-colonial economic and belief systems of Bisukha and Bidakho understood sustainability while the colonialists arrived with subtle economic strategies for exploitation. These two were incompatible. For instance, exploitation of the gold mines, forest resources, labour and land were only in favor of the white man. As seen from the preceding, however, the pre-colonial land authorities were not given any say as they remained on the periphery of decision-making.

Colonial perception imposed on the 'natives' made them lose control over their resources, which were vital to properly managing their environment. Land as a resource was alienated, forests were gazetted, and animals were crudely confiscated to feed the soldiers of World Wars I and II. Colonial policies such as merchant capital, taxation and land alienation which characterized colonialism, disrupted the continuity of the Luyia traditional resource utilization strategies, resulting in the prevalence of famines and diseases relating to such situations. However, not all the pre-capitalist modes and practices were dismantled. At least some were left for survival in the process of articulation. Based on the preceding information, the next chapter examines the theme of famines and food shortages in the area of study. Of interest is how the changing perception in the colonial setup affected pre-colonial food harnessing and storage strategies.

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113. Rodney, *Op. Cit.*

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