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Movement, Settlement and Land-use by the Akamba of Machakos County up to c.1895 in Kenya.

Authors:
Lydia K. Muendo[(1)]; Dr. Edwin Gimode[(2)]
[(1)(2)]Department of History, Archaeology and Political Studies.
Kenyatta University, Kenya.
Corresponding author: lydiakanini2013@gmail.com

Abstract

This article is an introduction to the environmental history of Machakos County. It creates a background to an investigation of the impact of colonial rule on the County's environmental history. The theoretical perspective of political ecology was applied in the understanding of the relationship between the Machakos Akamba and their environment in the pre-colonial period in this article. Political institutions developed by the Akamba were patterned according to land-use systems. Data for the article was drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included archival records at the Kenya National Archives and oral interviews. Secondary data was collected using both unpublished and published works. Descriptive data analysis using qualitative methods of content analysis was applied. In analysing the pre-colonial history of the Akamba the study concluded that the community remained in contact with other communities, especially the Maasai and Kikuyu and later with the Swahili and Arab traders. The entry of colonial rule altered these relations. This led to changes in the social organisation and adaptation to environmental conditions through the acceleration of trade, migration and raiding activities. As the community was still adapting, colonial rule halted the re-organisation process of the community's socio-political and economic systems. The study's recommendations are directed to an examination of the establishment of colonial rule in Machakos County and its impact on environmental change and adaptation.

Key Terms: Kamba, Machakos, Land, environment, change.

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Introduction

Settlement and land use patterns in the pre-colonial Machakos County was predicated on the area's peculiar geographical setting. This article discusses the origins of the Kamba community, settlement patterns, condition of the land (that is, vegetative cover, rivers, and topography), economic activities and indigenous knowledge of the environment. The late nineteenth-century ecological disasters are also discussed. These played a key function in shaping the relations between the Akamba and their environment in the context of the establishment of foreign rule. The background of the community's history illuminates its relation to the environment in terms of ecological conditions and adaptation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

African environmental historians have considered a myriad of subjects. These include the impact of urbanisation and industrialisation, conservatism, agricultural production, population increase, over-exploitation of natural resources, global trends on policymaking in environmental affairs, among others. Many African histories, with the exception of a few, in the twentieth century, however, tended to treat the natural environment merely as an inconsequential background upon which historical action developed. Environmental history was thus not a central subject of inquiry among these African historians. The environment was not regarded as a crucial phenomenon in the development of Africa's history, probably for fear of environmental determinism.

Nevertheless, historical processes are influenced by environmental factors in the background. For example, communities' economic survival and subsistence will often immediately shape actions and events in history. In addition, the drive for material benefits or particular forms of environmental perception as well as political eventualities plays a part in shaping historical events (Beinart & Hughes, 2007:11).

Constant interaction between human communities in Africa and their physical environment existed from the inception of human existence in the continent. This interaction was between given sizes of population and the socio-economic activities these people have pursued on the one hand and the resources of the environment available to them. This interaction has been highly dynamic, and it has varied from region to region. This is not only because natural environmental resources vary but because the activities of the people are themselves influenced by history (wider historical events and occurrences) and by their cultural outlook. Africans did not necessarily engage in activities that resulted in land degradation. Rather environmental histories are called to objectivity in analysing the relationship between man and his environment in Africa. Some scholars like Zeleza (1993) and Ogot (1979) attempted to show the crucial position of the environment in Africa's history. These pioneer African nationalist historians agreed that the environment is not the determinant of human activity but rather that it affects human behaviour insofar as the environment provides resource alternatives depending on the technologies and cultures of the social groups of historical inquiry.

African communities in the pre-colonial period developed land-use systems that integrated environmental conservation strategies. For example, farming communities practised shifting cultivation, allowing resource regeneration and communal control of resources, including forests and special (cultural, religious, medicinal) plant species. Due to the abundance of land in their areas, Kikuyu farmers, for example, ensure the sustainability of their resource base through a complex of measures. These included a relatively lengthy fallow period of between five and seven years, crop rotations (*kugarurira irio*) and

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intercropping (*kibococo*), as well as the erection of *miconjo* (lines of vegetable refuse at right angles to the slope) to limit land wash as well as improve soil fertility (Mackenzie, 2000:706). Among the pastoralists, communal grazing systems such as transhumance, designed to conserve land resources in which livestock and wildlife coexisted, were practised. These indigenous and traditional land conservation practices were passed from generation to generation. This was the case for the Machakos Akamba, who practised shifting cultivation and transhumance pastoralism, ensuring resource utilisation and environmental sustainability equilibrium.

The nationalist historiography of the 1960s challenged colonial historiography majorly for its lack of objectivity. Nationalist historiography made a case for the existence of African history in its own right. However, insufficient attention to environmental issues prevented nationalist historiography from appreciating the complexity of local ecological knowledge before and during colonial rule. This hindered an objective attempt to show that Africans had local systems of environmental knowledge and that there were changes initiated by Africans themselves in the areas they inhabited (Kimambo, 1996:247). Nationalist historiography waned towards the end of the 1960s. Most nationalist historians were disillusioned since the anticipated fast development towards greater political freedom and economic emancipation in the new African nations did not take place.

The underdevelopment theory-informed historical research and writing in the 1970s. Scholars questioned the absence of speedy development in the African continent after the ouster of foreign domination (Leys, 1975; Kitching, 1977; Swainson, 1977; Langdon, 1976; Amin, 1976; Phillips, 1977). Throughout the 1970s, research concentrated on the economic system brought by colonialism, thus a focus on the political economy of colonialism and post-colonialism. Historians concentrated on the colonial period in order to show the impact of capitalism under imperialism. The aim of underdevelopment scholars was to prove that African colonial economies were underdeveloped as a periphery of the capitalist system through systematic extraction of capital to the European centres. However, the historiography of the 1970s, just like the nationalist one, did not pay sufficient attention to environmental issues and thus could not explain local initiatives in ecological matters.

Questions began to be raised in relation to African development and the environment in the 1980s. The chief concern was the sustainability of African environments in the face of externally imposed developmental agendas, especially in the rural areas. This coincided with broadening the scope of history as a discipline to include branches of study such as environmental and gender history (Anderson, 2002:12). Doubts were raised about the African environment in relation to developing strategies that impoverished the poor peasant and enriched the capitalist system. However, this was not the motive of the strategies. For example, inputs such as credit extension, marketing and infrastructure are ill distributed in Africa and in accordance to or agreement with colonial patterns favouring the so-called 'high-potential areas'. Independent governments have generally perpetuated these patterns. In addition, large-scale hydro-power projects have resulted in the loss of agricultural land and human settlements (Richards, 1975). Although Africa is not yet a net contributor to the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, this continent cannot escape the worldwide negative consequences of this phenomenon. Clearing forests for agriculture and logging robs the world of an essential sink of greenhouse gases. In Kenya, the wood energy policy stresses the need to ensure adequate supplies of wood energy through sustainable yields while protecting the environment (Scherr & Yadav, 1996:29).

During the 1990s, the importance of the environment in history began to occupy researchers of the African society

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with theories of underdevelopment underlying their studies. The dominant academic discourses of environmental degradation and decline, as well as the idea of Africa's incapacity to manage its own environment, began to be questioned in a critical way. With the establishment of colonial rule, populations were moved to infertile and fragile ecological zones resulting in the collapse of pre-colonial ecosystems and the emergence of a cycle of poverty due to environmental degradation. Fertile soils and healthy ecological zones were reserved for Europeans. In the various historical epochs, the struggle over Africa's natural resources necessitated a narrative of degradation to blame the people for mismanagement or see rural people as passive victims. The narrative was discernible through a conflict set up between the international forces of conservation and those local and international interests that were pushing for the exploitation of natural resources as an engine for development (McCann, 1999:6). As such, due to the impact of colonialism on human societies and their environment, African scholars began to engage with the subject of conservation and environmental degradation towards the end of the twentieth century.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Machakos County's Physical Environment

Machakos County extends approximately from 1° to 3° south of the equator. It lies between latitudes 0° 45' and 1° 30' south of the equator and longitude 36° 45' and 37° 45' east of the Greenwich Meridian. It borders Kitui County to the east and Kajiado County to the west. In the south, it borders Makueni County, while Nairobi and Kiambu Counties are to the northwest. Towards the northeast, it borders Murang'a and Embu counties. The County has an approximate area of 5,818 square kilometres and is subdivided into eight sub-counties. These include Machakos Town, Mavoko, Kangundo, Matungulu, Yatta, Masinga, Kathiiani and Mwala.

Land in the county rises from slightly below 600 metres above sea level in the extreme south to 1,100 metres in the northeast and 1,600 metres in the northwest. In the centre of the county are hills and small massifs such as Kangundo, Iveti, Mbooni, Mua and Kilungu, which are abrupt and well-featured (KNA/DC/MKS/4/1:12). These massifs rise to a height of 1,800 – 2,000 metres. They are surrounded by a large plateau, which is elevated to about 1,700 metres in the west and slopes down to 700 metres in the southeast (Kenya, 1993:2). The hillsides consist for the most part of a series of relatively narrow ridges with very steep, occasionally precipitous sides and reach elevations of 1,800-2,000 metres; they generally rise about 600-750 metres above the surrounding country.

Both the hills and the surrounding plateau are of ancient basement rock, mainly schist, grey gneiss, quartzite and marble. However, the basement system is broken in the northwest by the volcanic Ol Donyo Sabuk and in the southwest by the volcanic Chyulu Hills. Donyo Sabuk is a single mountain rising to a height of 2,144 metres, and the Chyulu rises to 2,392 metres (Tiffen; 1994:18). Similarly, the basement system overlooks the Yatta plateau's volcanic outflow, which forms an escarpment on the east side of the Athi River backed by a gently inclined eastward-sloping surface. The Athi-Kapiti plains in the western and north-western parts of the County are also of volcanic origin (Matheka; 1992:30). The rock formation of the county is divided into several groups. The major ones are the Precambrian rocks of the basement system, which covers the greater part of the county. The tertiary sediments and the volcanic with Miocene phonolites are also the oldest volcanic rocks found in Kapiti plains in the north-western part of the county and in the Yatta plateau.

In general, the hill zone may be regarded as marking the transition in this county between the hot and arid lowland plains to the east and the relatively temperate highlands to the west (KNA/DC/MKS/26/1/1:1-2). These highlands are in

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many ways a continuation of what is known as Kenya highlands. The geological movements that produced the Kenya highlands added their effects to Machakos and produced summits such as the Mua Hills (Simiyu; 1974:102). The topography has had some impact on the development of the county. The hill massifs of Iveti, Kangundo, Mua and Kangundo act as catchment areas for numerous springs and streams and are relatively high potential areas for agricultural production. This is because they receive considerably high rainfall in comparison with the low lying areas. Coffee is the major cash crop and is grown along the hills. Horticultural crops such as tomatoes are also grown under irrigation in the county. Oranges and mangoes have in recent years become important crops in the county. The low lying areas, which include the Kapiti plains and the Yatta plateau, are suitable for ranching.

Patterns of precipitation are of critical importance for agricultural and pastoral economies and for the continual regeneration of groundwater and river systems. These two factors are in turn influenced by altitude such that rainfall increases with the rise in altitude and also decline, from the central hills outwards, from 1200mm at nearly 2000m altitudes in the Mbooni and Iveti Hills to less than 600mm in the lowlands of the south-east and the northwest extreme dry plains. These include the Yatta plateau and some parts of the Mwala sub-county, which are also in the rain shadow of the hills (Tiffen; 1994:18). Consequently, the hill masses are cooler and wetter than the surrounding lowlands. However, crops mature faster and with less rain in the warmer climate of the lowlands than they do on the hills. The rainfall regime is bimodal, with the short rains starting in October and continuing through December, while the long rains begin in March and end in May. Two agricultural seasons, therefore, occur, both of short duration. Therefore, the months of January, February, August, and September are hot and dry, while June and July are cool and cloudy (Matheka; 1992:31-32). Rainfall in the county is not always reliable. Statistics show that in four out of ten years, there is a major drought in the county (Government of Kenya, 1993:2).

The soils are varied, just as the topographical and climatic zones of the county vary. Generally, red friable clay-loams are predominant in the hills, while sandy clay loams are common in the lower slopes of the hills and on the lowlands. The county's topography is a major factor in soil erosion, just as the nature of the soils. Soil erosion has been a concern for the longest time in the county. It was a major debate and political contest area during the colonial period. From the 1970s, the independent government was faced with a need to curb soil erosion in the county, hence the many government and non-governmental interventions.

The major impediment to agricultural development has always been a shortage of water. Limited availability of perennial domestic and livestock water has influenced settlement patterns. The better-watered areas are more densely populated. The overall drainage pattern is from west to east. The principal rivers draining the County are the Kalala, Thwake, Kaite and Mukuyu, all of which flow into the Athi River, which is also permanent. Most of the others are seasonal in their flow, virtually ceasing in the dry weather and becoming raging turbid outbursts in the rains. These rivers and streams have sand deposits along their beds. Sand harvesting is an important subject in the county with economic and socio-political implications, discussed in chapter five of this study.

Under undisturbed conditions (quite rare at the time of the study), the vegetation of the greater part of the county consists of thorny woodland dominated by acacia and Commiphora. The woodland contains thickets and develops into gallery forests along streams. On higher sites, bush willows woodland takes over, and evergreen forest is present on the tops of the hills sent. On black clay soil areas, grassland occurs adapted to poor drainage. This

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vegetation has been removed (for cultivation) or modified for grazing in most areas. Wood-cutting for the establishment of settlements, agricultural land and charcoal burning has also led to a great transformation in the general outlook of the county. Most of the forest areas in the county, apart from the indigenous reserves, are at present are manmade.

The hills were covered with bush-type forest. There was thick grass within the bush. The topsoil was rich and readily absorbed rainfall. The grass and bush were protected against runoff since even the gullies were covered by vegetation. The flatter country surrounding the hills was uninhabited and was covered by bush trees and dense, tall grass. In the past, this area was abundant in the big game, including rhino and elephants. Many of the larger streams and rivers were perennial, with an abundance of fish in the pools of these waterways. Forest trees were not common except clumps of forest trees like podocarpus patches that were quite frequent but not dense. There is the possibility that the true forest might have been cut down and burned during earlier settlement in the area by earlier inhabitants (KNA/DC/MKS/4/10:80). However, there is no historical or archaeological evidence in support of such a speculation. It could be that, since this is part of tropical Africa, it was always covered by the typical savannah grassland vegetation. This vegetation began to change due to population increase, sedentary settlement and variations in economic activities.

Geography is the crucible within which history is made (Matheka, 1992:29). Thus the evolution of cultures should be seen as a response to environmental or climatic conditions (Ogot, 1979:2). Greater attention should be paid to man's cultural inheritance rather than to the mere environment. This refutes ideas in support of environmental determinism (the belief that the physical environment by itself shapes humans, their actions, and their thoughts). A historian venturing into environmental studies needs to understand that the cultural variations that occur around the world are not determined by a society's physical surroundings. Human action and the natural environment have continually interacted in complex ways, altering the process of both society and the environment. The human past can indeed be defined as a record of the constant interaction between history and geography, humans and habitat, society and nature, time and space.

The human past can be regarded as a record of the continuous interaction between history and geography, humans and habitat, society and nature and time and space (Zeleza; 1993:25). This study demonstrates a complex interrelationship between the physical environment and human activity in pre-colonial Machakos County. The history of the Akamba shows a society whose development was closely linked to the environment. The community endeavoured to conquer nature in context, and that struggle constituted definite and conscious progress that formed the history of the Akamba (Simiyu, 1974:104). The natural environment, in turn, influenced the choices available to the Akamba in one way or the other. As such, organisational features of production and consumption are, in several ways, influenced by the environment (Kjekshus, 1996:184). While historians believe that contexts shape people, events and interpretations, contexts do not determine history (Leibhardt, 1988:24). Human beings have the capacity to transcend their contexts and exercise a decisive agency and thus influence historical change (Zeleza; 1993:25).

This relationship between society and the natural environment is dialectical in that environments shape human actions, and human action, in turn, shapes the environment (Leibhardt, 1988:30). The Akamba in the pre-colonial period evolved economic and political systems that were adapted to the natural environment in which they lived. Therefore, the physical environment of Machakos

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County is central to understanding the environmental history of the county as such environmental history seeks to understand the environment in a historical context while at the same time understanding human history in an environmental context (Isenberg, 2014:6).

Migration, Settlement and the Emergence of the Akamba Community

In African scholarship, it is agreed that the creation of ethnicity in sub-Saharan Africa was a work of colonialism (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983:2). Just like many other African communities, the people of Ukambani did not think of themselves as "Kamba" before the 1940s (Osborne, 2014:3). According to Osborne, being Kamba was defined by each individual on the basis of their conception of "what virtues, values, and practices constituted 'proper' behaviour in their communities, and by extension, constituted the basis of "Kamba culture." Ambler (1988) further contends that the commencement of colonial rule led to the promulgation of ethnic boundaries and removed the flexibility that previously existed among communities in Kenya.

People called the "Kamba" could conveniently drop that identity by moving into other communities and dwelling among them, a common practice fuelled by existing trade bonds and intermarriage. However, the advent of colonial rule made people acutely aware of their ethnic identity since such an identity was critical to colonial administration on the basis of the policy of "divide and rule", the creation of reserves and other administrative units. It is important to note that pre-colonial African societies were not stagnant and unchanging, waiting passively for colonialism to usher them into 'civilisation'. On the contrary, African societies experienced significant change during the many generations preceding European incursion at the end of the nineteenth century.

Akamba did not always occupy historical Machakos or Kitui Counties. There are several postulations as to the origins of the community referred to as the Akamba/Kamba in this study. The Lambert proposition is that the Kamba and the Kikuyu and Embu were originally inhabitants of Shugwaya near the Kenya-Somali border before the Galla drove them out in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. However, none of the coastal traditions contain a Kamba or Kikuyu presence at Shungwaya, nor do Kamba and Kikuyu traditions record the name (Munro, 1975:8). It does not, therefore, sound plausible. Some Akamba accounts suggest an original homeland to the north or northeast in 'Misri' followed by migration due to Pharaonic persecution. A Biblical influence on the myth or a Shungwaya contest that forced the Akamba out of the area before the sixteenth century is a possible explanation of this account.

Another theory suggests that all people of pre-colonial Kenya were dropped by *Ngai* (God) or *Mumbi* (Creator) from heaven, and they were set atop a rock on a hill in Kinany'e in Athi River. From there, the different communities, including the Mbeere, Kikuyu, Maasai and Embu, were scattered over different settlement areas. According to this theory, the Mbeere were the first community to ever inhabit eastern Kenya. It is probable that the Akamba did not move into Kenya from Shungwaya but from some other area, south-eastern Kenya or north-eastern Tanzania. Whether the Akamba came to the highlands of Machakos from Shugwaya or from some other area, most Kamba traditions point to their migration into Machakos from the south or south-east usually expressed as coming from the Kilimanjaro side.

Akamba occupation of present-day central Tanzania, in the vicinity of Mount Kilimanjaro, is the most reliable account (Lambert, 1947; Ambler, 1988; Matheka, 1992). This tradition also puts the Kamba at the time in close proximity with the Nyamwezi of Central Tanzania, from whom they subsequently parted, the Nyamwezi moving towards Lake

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Victoria, and the Akamba, by way of the Tsavo River to the region of Chyulu sometime before 1600 AD. In fact, *Kamba* is said to be a place name in the pre-colonial Nyamwezi country (Lambert, 1947:130).

Munro (1975) contends that the Kamba family certainly established itself as one of the ruling dynasties of Unyamwezi, possibly in the seventeenth century. This, according to Munro, should be regarded as a part of the numerous offshoots scattered throughout southern Kenya and northern Tanzania rather than evidence of an original homeland of the Kamba in the area of the Nyamwezi. The perspective stresses an actual blood relationship between the Akamba and the Nyamwezi. Evidence in support of such a blood relationship is that the Akamba maintained a peer relationship (*utani*) with the Nyamwezi, a relationship that did not exist between them and any other community (KNA/DC/MKS/7/1, 1939:22).

The similarity in the culture of teeth-filling or chipping is further evidence of a closer relationship. The explanation of this close relationship is that there was a man (Mkamba) in the Tanganyika Basin who had two children, that is Kamba and Nyamwezi, long before the Kamba migrated to the Kilimanjaro region (Lambert, 1947:2). The Akamba and the Nyamwezi were in constant contact with each other through the long-distance trade that sourced goods for the interior and transported them to the East African Coast. Such a relationship was likely stretched further through oral history to include an actual blood relationship theory.

Towards the end of the sixteenth, the Akamba moved out of the Kilimanjaro region, possibly due to resources competition with the Maasai and other communities (Ambler, 1988:9). A northward movement following the Tsavo River led them to Chyulu Hills. The area was inhabitable since it was rocky and poor in the water supply. It was impossible for them to reach high parts of the hills, making it hard to utilise the available resources at the site, especially wild game. They then moved onto the Kibwezi plains, but long seasonal droughts in the area forced them to move north until they reached Mbooni hills in the mid-seventeenth century. The Mbooni Hills, with thick forests, high rainfall, numerous streams and fertile soils, offered the Akamba the kind of environment they had long sought. Indeed, the Akamba of Machakos and some groups of Kitui Akamba look upon Mbooni as their original 'home' (KNA/DC/MKS/4/10:80). Over time the Akamba began to spread out from this central point due to several factors, among them economic pressure.

Initial migrations from this central area were over short distances and largely restricted to the hills in and around Mbooni, areas that were suitable for cultivation. The plains below Mbooni hills were occupied by the Maasai, and thus the Akamba preferred the hills of Iveti, Maputi, Kaumoni, Kisau, Nzaui, Kilungu and Kalama, which were more secure and better suited for crop production (KNA/DC/MKS/4/10:81). The hills served to avoid direct confrontation with the Maasai. By the mid-eighteenth century, pioneers dispersed from these hills in all directions, settling in central Kitui. They made their final migrations into the drier northern Kitui and Matungulu and Kangundo in northern Machakos in the nineteenth century. Akamba expansion was a continuing process taking place in slow, protracted advances over a long period of time. The Akamba were still moving and settling over new areas within the county when colonial rule disrupted and halted such movements.

Land Tenure Systems

According to Lambert (1947:133), the Akamba first settled on the southern and eastern fringes of the Mbooni massif. They were confined to the hills for a considerable period of time due to the threat by the Maasai, who roamed the plains below. The settled area was uninhabited but with plentiful game and enough water supplies. As such, the Akamba altered their economic practices to adapt to these

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conditions. Lambert contends that the Akamba were primarily hunters and only resorted to cultivation due to Maasai threats in the lower areas. As such, the Akamba began to depend more on agriculture. The land was a major factor influencing the development of Kamba society. The main dynamic was slow population increase accompanied by the relative abundance of land for cultivation, grazing and hunting, and an abundance of trees to hung beehives (Munro, 1975:12). The adopted political and social institutions were suited to the constant migration and settlement patterns of individuals and small groups.

Land tenure is serious of relationships between individuals with regard to the ways in which land may be used. The Akamba of Machakos was divided into a number of genealogical sections known as *mbai* (clan or clans). Each section is believed to be essential of one patrilineal blood, a common male ancestor. Many of these parent clans are scattered over most of the county, while others are found in Kitui. The scattering of the parent clans in most areas was so complete that a kinship group in any one continuous area was usually an extended family of a few generations only. This was the beginning of the land-kin synthesis as far as the Akamba were concerned (Lambert, 1947:133). Parent clan names were mostly tied to an original actual area in the Mbooni Hills and its vicinity. For example, the *Atangwa* clan is formed by a people from Utangwa, *Eombe* from Kiombe, *Akitondo* from Kitondo, *Anzauni* from Kisau, *Ethanga* from Ithanga and so on. This has a similarity with the Kikuyu assert that there were nine flats of land at Mukurwe wa Gathaga, which were the original holdings of the founders of the nine Kikuyu major clans. An important argument advanced by Lambert (1947) is that some of the Akamba clans were not of Kamba origin. This shows the fluid nature of pre-colonial Kenyan communities as some of these clans were of Embu, Meru, Tharaka or even Kikuyu origin.

With economic pressures and security threats in the original settlement, it was usual for a man to go out to hunt to supplement household subsistence. During a hunting expedition, an individual noted a piece of bush that seemed fertile. When the opportunity occurred, he would go back to demarcate the area and claim it as his piece of arable land (*ng'undu*). *Ng'undu* (unit of cultivation {arable land} and homestead) was the closest definition of private land tenure in pre-colonial Machakos County. Such claims were respected. Over time, the search for usable land intensified, and the *ngu'ndu* included units to be used as home pastures. Plentiful land permitted the abandonment of such land units when the soil had been exhausted. This influenced the custom whereby elder sons left their father's homes to set up their own homesteads (*misyi*, singular *musyi*) in other areas.

A high degree of individual mobility and a continually expanding frontier of settlement resulted. Individual pioneers moved into the bush or wasteland (*weu*) to establish their own *misyi*. These *misyi* were divided into two distinct portions of land-based on their usage. There was the cultivated land (*ngundu*) and the *kisesi* (grazing land. Although all grazing was communal, the original meaning and use of the *kisese* was of a cattle pen rather than a strict grazing area. Demarcation of land that was already claimed and of the grazing and cultivated lands was done by branches in a way that was recognisable to the rest of the settlement. This was to ensure the protection of planted crops. When a family's cattle increased in numbers, it was inconvenient to graze them on the uncultivated *kisese*, they were taken to a common grazing area (*weu*). This *weu* also meant open unclaimed land where individuals could mark out portions.

In the *weu* an individual established a *kyengo* (plural *syengo* - livestock post) for his livestock. The men or their relatives went out to take care of the cattle in the *syengo*. The *kyengo* served as a reserve grazing area when pasture

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began to diminish or when it was dangerous to graze in the broad open country due to Maasai raiding threats. As cattle gained greater economic significance, family heads tended to establish their *misyi* in their own *isese*. The women went to the *ng'undu* for their agricultural work each day and returned to the *misyi* in the evening. Greater importance was attached to the *ng'undu* more than the *isese*. The *ng'undu* was regarded as a necessity because it meant subsistence, a primary right for every Akamba. Indeed, the title of the *ng'undu* was almost perpetual (unless the owner decided to move to the *weu* to establish another *ng'undu*), while that of the *kisesi* depended on who utilised it at any particular time. The attitude towards grazing was that the *weu* was open for use by an individual of the community. Land that had never been in use for cultivation was always available for any member of the community to utilise until colonial rule set limits on where people could graze.

Generally, the *ng'undu* was held in high esteem since it had spiritual connotations. On the *ng'undu*, the owner sacrificed to the *aimu* (spirits of the departed members of his kinship). This portion of land was rarely sold and, in most cases, was divided among the sons who then carried on with the same tradition. If the owner of the *ng'undu* decided to move out of the land, then he would bequeath it to whomever he wished or "sold" it or got a token for it. If the owner decided to keep allegiance to his *ng'undu* even after moving out, a member of the family constantly visited the place to make sure that the rest of the settlement understood that it was not abandoned.

Over-fragmentation of land was guarded against by a principle of land acquisition based on the birth order of sons. The eldest son (*ikithathi*) moved out first to establish his *musyi* in the *weu*, followed by the other sons. Only the youngest son (*ilumaita*) remained to safeguard his mother's interests (in the case of a polygamous family). If the man had only one wife, then when all the sons left, his position was taken up by one man, his youngest son. As demonstrated in the next chapter, this organisation and flexibility of land tenure were halted and disrupted by colonialism.

Socio-political Organisation of the Akamba

In the new settlements, the pioneers grouped themselves in *motui* (singular *utui*). This was a group of homesteads composing a compact territorial entity strong enough to put up a reasonable defence against aggression. Such new settlements were of mixed *mbai* origins. The settlers retained loyalty to their parent clans. In the settlements, social relations were based on mutual assistance and joint defence rather than on kinship.

For the immediate practical concerns of everyday life, the *utui* replaced the kinship group. The *utui* was self-supporting and economically complete and had no need for contact with the outside world other than to meet or start aggression to protect its herds or to add to them. Each *utui* had its own men's club (*kisuka*) in which the young married men (*nthele*) and the elders (*atumia*) met to discuss general affairs. Each settlement also had a recreation ground (*kituto*), its government comprising the general council of elders (*nzama*) and a judicial/tribunal body (*asili*), a warrior group (*athiani*) and its own sacred ground (*kitonyeo kya ng'ondu* or *ithembo*). The famous *kilumi* (indigenous and ritualistic) dance events took place on the sacred ground.

It is important to note that the Akamba did not develop a centralised political system. The fluid nature of the society, with its constant migration and settlement, coupled with the shifting system of land use, did not favour such a centralised system (Lambert, 1947:134). Kamba society was generally fragmented into shallow lineages and small territorial organisations, lacking in centralising institutions. Nevertheless, the possibility of such a development cannot be utterly dismissed. At the advent of colonialism, there

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were all indications that the conditions of centralisation of administrative authority had been planted (Lambert, 1947:135). The *kivalo* (a grouping of *motui* among whom social interaction such as intermarriage is complex enough to produce common interest) was an example of steps towards centralisation. The kivalo, however, operated at special times when tasks considered too great for one *utui* were performed. These included fighting and raiding bands which were organised on the basis of the *kivalo*.

Central operations of the *kivalo* were entrenched in a representative group of elders (*king'ole*), which met to discuss and sanction actions to be taken by the inhabitants of an entire *kivalo*. The punishment of sorcerers and persistent offenders (criminals) were chief functions of the *king'ole*. Recreation activities of the *kivalo*, such as dancing, could at times be carried out in a common *kituto*. Dances were of various types. The most common was that of the unmarried youth who danced under the watch of custodian elders (both men and women). Social and sexual education for the youth was carried out in such dances.

Raiding the Maasai, which required minimal organisation, was carried out by the *anake* (young unmarried men) and the *nthele* of a *kivalo*. These raids and counter-raids made relations between the Kamba and the Maasai discordant even during colonial rule. A member of the *kivalo* known as a *muthiani* (an advisor or general) provided leadership. This *muthiani* was not a leader of the community but rather an elder who used his knowledge of the seasonal movement of the game and the Maasai on the plains to initiate both hunting and raiding expeditions. Raiding, therefore, gave an opportunity for individuals to accrue authority and command over the community. A man's status in society was measured by his wealth and capabilities rather than his birth or social connections (Tignor, 1976:14). Nonetheless, this opportunity was diminished because the knowledge and skill possessed by the *muthiani* did not extend to the *nzama* or even *kivalo* to give them distinguished honour. The *muthiani* acquired wealth (he got a large share of the spoils though he did not actively fight) and prestige from the success of the expeditions they led successfully.

Ecological Change and Human Response

The relationship between the Kamba and other communities were not always estranged. Interaction between them and the Kikuyu was less abrasive. The Kamba economy was one that relied on the family farm to produce the bulk of subsistence while livestock grazed on *isese* (home pastures). These failed in times of rainfall shortage and droughts leading to famines. Famine was a recurrent phenomenon in Machakos County. Unreliable rainfall was a feature of most of the areas settled by the Akamba. Most Kamba-Kikuyu trade and intermarriage occurred in times of famine when desperation drove the Akamba across the Maasai-controlled plains to seek food, *kuthuua*, among the Kikuyu, Mbeere and Embu who occupied the more agriculturally productive central Kenya highlands. A number of men and women participated in this endeavour at one time or another. In exchange for their livestock, livestock products and sometimes labour, the Akamba regularly obtained foodstuffs from the Kikuyu, Mbeere and Embu (Ambler, 1985:212).

Famines among the Akamba generated a phenomena of constant mobility. These movements also served as an impetus in the development of trade connected to the survival of the community. Commercial links developed between the East African Coast and the eastern highlands initiated and controlled by the Akamba. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Akamba regularly supplied ivory to the Arabs in Mombasa. Ivory was the item of greatest demand as well as the most lucrative, whose centre of trade lay in Kitui (Ambler, 1985:210).

The Machakos Akamba did not involve themselves extensively in the trade. They only took small quantities of ivory, honey and livestock products to the coast. Ivory was

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obtained from hunting or, more commonly, by trade with the Kikuyu (who received in return livestock, gourds, arrow-poison, and metal-work). The Akamba, however, travelled to the coast more often to sell cattle, a trade largely based on the southern areas. These trade networks were instrumental in the rising of wealthy individuals in the Kamba. These individuals represented the abundance of food supplies and the ability of an individual to lead a group of people, making the *kuthuua* system successful.

The Machakos Kamba felt the full impact of external trade only later in the century when Swahili and Arab traders ventured into the Machakos highlands. During the 1870s and 1880s, trading Arab and Swahili trading caravans entered Machakos to purchase local cattle and ivory supplies and find guides to Kikuyuland. Unfortunately, this also coincided with some of the hardest times in the history of the community in particular and eastern Africa in general (Ambler, 1988:3).

In the 1880s and 1890s, central-eastern Kenya was one of the many regions in sub-Saharan Africa assaulted by the extraordinary confluence of disease and famine, in the wake of which colonialism followed (Osborne, 2014:32). People saw a connection between the disaster of drought, famine, and disease on the one hand and the advance of European economic and political power on the other (Ambler, 1988:2). These ecological crises greatly weakened the economic, social and political base of the Kamba. They also led to the social disintegration of the community, with many of the residents opting to migrate out of the crises zones to secure their survival. Many migrated towards Kikuyuland in central Kenya through Yatta where they were assimilated while others migrated into Kangundo and Matungulu as far as Ol Donyo Sabuk. These areas were initially utilised by the Maasai, as evidenced by the various place names such as Manyatta (a place of Maasai homesteads), Mbilini (pastureland) and Ol Donyo Sabuk (large mountain). As the Maasai economy shrank due to the late nineteenth-century ecological disasters, the Akamba migrated to these vacated regions.

Rinderpest was one of these major ecological disasters since it affected the heart of the Akamba pastoral economy. This was a viral disease that led to the death of up to 95 per cent of the cattle population in some areas (Maxon, 2009:144). This disease occurred in Ukambani in 1891 and 1895 and 1897, and 1898. Locust swarms also swept through Machakos in 1894 and 1895, followed by influenza in 1895. Drought and famine accompanied these diseases. The diseases were spread over large areas by hunting and trading caravans that traversed the region over long distances in search of a livelihood. Famine was the most devastating of these ecological disasters. The 1870s, 1880s and 1890s produced arguably the most severe famines ever known (Ambler, 1988:124). The *Muvunga* (variously known as *Njaa Kuu*, *Ngomanisye*, Great Famine and *Magunia*) famine was the most serious since it coincided with the loss of cattle and people due to disease. The cattle that remained were the only hope standing between life and death for families in Ukambani. *Muvunga* came at a time when other environmental factors had already put pressure upon crop production.

While the rinderpest and locust epidemics were still raging, smallpox broke out in 1895. This disease was associated with the caravan trade and was known in East Africa as early as 1892. However, in the 1890s, the otherwise childhood disease affected adults as well as children. Smallpox led to the death of between a quarter and a third of the human population in Machakos (Munro, 1975:48). Triple tragedy befell the Akamba, who were already affected by famine and rinderpest. These ecological disasters were especially severe in Eastern Kenya, where the production systems, which were interdependent, of the Taita, Maasai, Akamba and Kikuyu were greatly affected.

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The Kamba community was faced by the deterioration of agricultural resources, the sudden decline of surrounding pastoralist populations, and the advance of European economic and political power (Ambler, 1988:8). Locust swarms and the death of family members from disease meant that families did not grow enough food reserves to enable them to survive through the famine. British regulation of trade coupled with livestock quarantine conditions due to rinderpest also meant that the community could not procure food from other areas (Osborne, 2014:12). Livestock became an important part of the Kamba economy with the decline of Maasai influence on the grazing lands in south-western Machakos in the 1880s. By the 1890s, the Maasai had abandoned much of eastern Kajiado. This was due to a decline in their population following a pleura-pneumonia outbreak between 1883 and 1887 and a rinderpest outbreak in 1891.

These diseases led to a decline in the Maasai economy and source of subsistence, leading to famine. Therefore, the constant threat to livestock ownership among the Akamba was eliminated. Accordingly, individuals in the community began to own large numbers of stock that became an integral part of the community's social, political and economic life in the 1880s and 1890s. Cattle permitted people to survive during the famine for several reasons. First, the milk, blood and meat were a source of subsistence after the end of drought as it would take at least one season to grow food crops (Osborne, 2014:46). The Great Famine was too severe since the interdependent ecological systems of Eastern Kenya were all affected. Ecological interdependence had previously prevented the occurrence of regional famines. These disasters led to a decline in the capacity of the Akamba people to deal with ecological changes in their environment and left them too weak to effectively resist colonial rule (Rocheleau, Benjamin, Diang'a, 1995:12).

Regional economy breakdown in eastern Kenya in the late nineteenth century was, however, not entirely due to ecological disasters. Food procurements by trade caravans and the nascent colonial administration, as well as the 'pacifying' activities of the latter, were important in the deterioration of the economic conditions of the Kamba. The community did forcefully provide food to the many large caravans that were traversing it on their way to and from Uganda in the 1890s and provided food for imperial activities. Besides food procurement, there was also the looting and destruction of local economies that had begun with Swahili caravans and carried on by the expeditions of the colonial administration (Ambler, 1988:9). One such expedition in Machakos in December 1895, for example, led to the burning of many villages and over 500 cattle and 1,000 goats were confiscated (Munro, 1975:35).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: This article analysed the pre-colonial history of the Akamba. It examined the origin of the community, the socio-political organisation and land tenure systems to the end of the nineteenth century. It also discussed the late nineteenth century's pervasive ecological and economic changes that impacted pre-colonial Akamba society equilibrium. These led to changes in the social organisation and adaptation to the changes in environmental conditions through the acceleration of trade, migration and raiding activities. As the community was still adapting, colonial rule halted the process of re-organisation of the community's socio-political and economic systems. The theoretical perspective of political ecology was applied in the understanding of the relationship between the Machakos Akamba and their environment in the pre-colonial period in this article. Political institutions developed by the Akamba were patterned according to land-use systems. This community remained in contact with other communities, especially the Maasai and Kikuyu and later with the Swahili and Arab traders. The entry of colonial rule altered these relations.

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Recommendation: Recommendations are directed to an examination of the establishment of colonial rule in Machakos County and its impact on environmental change and adaptation.

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