

# A History of Gusii Women in the Informal Economy in Colonial Kenya

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**Abstract:** Defining informal economy is as problematic as documenting its historical evolution. Many writers tend to present the view that informal economy, where most women are employed, is a post-colonial phenomenon. Others treat informal economy as frozen in time (lacking evolution and transformation) and, by so doing, fail to appreciate the transformation and evolution of women in the informal economy over time. Yet others fail to acknowledge the differences experienced by women in the informal economy in varying spaces. By focusing on the history of Gusii women in the informal economy, this chapter attempts to depart from the norm whereby scholars tend to examine informal economy as static, homogenous and post-colonial.

**Keywords:** Gusii, Women, Informal Economy, Colonial.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It was not until recently in the 1990s, in the era of liberalization of the economy, that the informal economy came to get the attention of the Kenyan government. This was the time when it was realized that the informal economy contributes a lot to the country's wealth and employment creation, especially among women (Chen 2001, African Union 2008; World Bank 2009; Haan 2000, Verick 2008, Schneider 2002).

The informal economy is not a post-colonial phenomenon. The informal economy in Kenya, as we know it today, properly emerged in the pre-colonial era when various ethnic communities exchanged goods and services through barter trade (Ochieng' 1992). It is for this reason that some scholars have argued that informal economy is a precolonial phenomenon (Sparks and Barnett 2010, Bangasser 2000). According to Ochieng' (1992) precolonial Kenyan communities produced for both home consumption and also for sale and through this, there existed, primitive capital accumulation of wealth.

However, with the introduction of colonial rule and, consequently, the establishment of a centralized colonial government, the informal economy became legally curtailed in favour of the formal economy which was equated with modernity and westernization civilization. The centralized colonial government required to raise revenue to fund government budgets. Revenue would be realized mainly through taxes, fines and licenses and this would not have been obtained through informal channels which operated in the informal economy. Though not favoured, the informal economy continued to exist side by side with the formal economy. The existence of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of economic systems is what Maxon (1992) refers to as articulation of modes of production.

Thus, colonial efforts to regulate and formalize African economies did not completely phase out precolonial informal economies. What happened, instead, is that precolonial informal economies underwent evolution and transformation in the face of monetarization of the economy, as a result of which, barter trade gradually began to pave way to the monetarized economy. While this is the case, two problems emerge from a scholarly point of view. Firstly, informal economies have not received a lot of adequate attention in historical studies since they are treated as a post-colonial and post-Cold War phenomenon. Secondly, the involvement of women in informal economies from the pre-colonial period to the present has either gone unnoticed or misrepresented (Ayuka 2017). This chapter attempts to give voice to the silence surrounding the historical transformation and evolution of Gusii women's informal economies.

Kenya provides a classic example of countries where women's informal economies can be historically studied for two reasons. In the first place, precolonial trade existed between the various ethnic communities which exist in Kenya because of varying ecological zones and economic activities which such zones made possible (Ochieng' 1992). In the second place, the penetration of European capitalism in Kenya, on the eve of establishment of colonial rule, occasioned massive alienation of African land, introduction of wage labour, high taxation, and formal education of Africans, all of which conspired to force men and women into the formal and informal economy in varying degrees (Kiruthu 2006, Francis, 1995; Leys, 1975; Zwanenberg, 1975). Unlike their colonized male counterparts, Kenyan women, just like women elsewhere, landed few jobs in the formal economy (Narayan 2005). This study provides a history of Gusii women in the informal economy during the colonial period.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Data which was used to inform this study was derived from the research which the author undertook as part of a post-graduate study in history at Kenyatta University. The data comprised oral interviews, archival data and secondary literature. Primary data was collected at Kenya National Archives, oral data was derived from interviews conducted in Nyamira County and secondary data was accessed at major university libraries in Kenya.

### Conceptualization

"Informal economy" is a problematic concept. Others view it as that part of the economy which operates in the shadows of the formal economy (Ihrig and Moe 2004, Schneider and Klingnair 2004, Schneider 2007). For this reason, the informal economy has been looked down upon and denigrated by governments due to a lack of official policy, government allocation of resources and programs to promote this segment of the overall economy. Others view the informal economy as that sector which is not regulated by government and which exists outside the government tax bracket (Ayuka 2017).

Whichever way one wants to view the informal economy, it is better understood from a comparative point of view, especially when it is compared and contrasted with the formal economy. The formal economy is a product of the emergence of government. In this case, government is that institution which regulates the economy through taxes, licenses and legislation. Over the years, government taxes, licenses and legislation have served the purpose of stifling the informal economy. Thus, while informal economies existed in the pre-capitalist/pre-colonial era, the introduction of a colonial government in Kenya drastically led to the transformation in the manner in which informal economies were conceptualized, how they evolved and how they related or existed with the formal economy. Since then, the issue of taxation and regulation has come to define the difference between the formal and informal economies.

Other than comparing and contrasting the informal and formal economy as well as examining the relationship between the informal economy and the central government in terms of taxation, licensing and legislation, the informal economy can also be conceptualized in terms of its production methods, consumption patterns, business organization level and personal sophistication. Thus, the informal economy does not relate in a formal and legal manner to/with the various units of the economy. The informal economy is that part of the overall economy where the production methods and economic relationships are very informal, not recorded in official statistics, or quoted in legal terms. According to Geertz (1963) the formal economy is "firm - centred economy" while the informal economy is the "bazaar - type economy". According to McGee (1973), the formal economy is derived from capitalist form of production", and the informal economy is derived from "the peasant system of production".

According to Hart (1973) the formal economy generates formal income opportunities and the informal economy generates informal income opportunities. Others have labelled the formal economy as generating formal employment and operating largely legally while informal economy generates self-employment and operates largely illegally (Setharuman 1976, Ekpenyong 1985). In a nutshell, it is problematic to conceptualize, in precise terms, what constitutes the informal economy. In spite of that, the informal economy can be conceptualized as that part of the economy which is largely, but not wholly, small-scale in nature, tax evading, illegally existing, and not regulated by government.

### Participation of women in pre-colonial Gusii informal economy

The Gusii women were an important segment of the Gusii economy in the pre-colonial period as they played a crucial role in the farming sector. They did not just assist in the production of crops but they also played a part in the sale of the same crops in order to obtain what the Gusii people needed but did not produce. Maxon (1989) has noted for example that, in

pre-colonial times, Gusii women travelled long distances to go and trade their cereals with the Luo community in exchange of pots. Both crop production and trade were labor-intensive activities which Gusii women shouldered effectively to ensure the continued survival of their community. Some of the crop production activities in which Gusii women participated included the cultivating of crops such as *wimbi* (finger millet) maize, *mtama* (sorghum), pumpkins, sweet potatoes and cassava. Apart from crop cultivation, Gusii women also gathered wild fruits, firewood, vegetables and medicinal plants (Omwoyo, 2008;160). This was in addition to land preparation, planting, crop tending, harvesting, and farm produce marketing (*ibid*).

It is important to note that the Gusii produced a lot of food crops because incidences of crop failure were numerous in the precolonial period (Ogonda and Ochieng' 1992:14). Thus, the Gusii did not just produce surplus food crops for sale but also for sustainability in times of crop failure. Some of the food crops that Gusii women cultivated were used as food but some of the products from such crops were sold. For example, the Gusii women cultivated pumpkins from which they obtained both vegetables and gourds known as *ebirandi/amakuri* for storing milk (Oral Interview conducted on the 16<sup>th</sup> April 2015). Apart from using these gourds for storing their own milk, they also sold them to the neighboring Kipsigis community. The Kipsigis community are known for their practice of using gourds to make sour milk which they call *Mursik*. However, Gusii women started selling gourds to the Kipsigis much later after the establishment of the colonial administration in their country.

Apart from farm-based informal economy, the Gusii also practiced iron-working or blacksmithing and women played a crucial role in this industry. This is one of the oldest industries among the Gusii and it was not practiced by many households. Ochieng' (1974) states that iron working may have existed in Gusiiland since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century especially at the Sironga Valley. Wandiba (1992:18) has underscored that craft and manufacturing industries were "important economic pursuits in the lives of many nineteenth-century communities [the Gusii included] in Kenya." Such industries produced goods which were vital to society, supplementing and complementing agricultural and pastoral activities. Some of the products made from iron industry were more important than others. The most utilitarian or more useful products were those that supported pastoralism, farming, warfare, hunting and initiation rites. Less important items included those generally grouped as ornaments which included chains of various sizes, rings and coiled ornaments worn about the ankles (*ebitinge*) and wrists (*omootoro*), different types of knives such as *ekoyo*, special type of knife that was used to shape stools known as *ebiteni*, and *esarangenyi* (a special type of knife that was used to cut meat). Since iron-working was preserved for certain families (Wandiba 1992:18), those who did not work-iron bought iron instruments from blacksmiths. Thus, iron-working constituted an important arena of the precolonial Gusii informal economy. Wives of blacksmiths played a crucial role in the sale of iron-wares because most Gusii male blacksmiths spent their leisure time drinking beer (Silberschmid 1999).

Apart from helping their male counterparts to sell their iron-wares, Gusii women also played a complimentary role in iron-working. Silberschmidt (1999) has underscored the participation of Gusii women in iron industry by stating that:

It had been discovered by the Gusii, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that iron could be obtained by heating a certain kind of soil. Many men were busily involved in the handling of iron and many worked as blacksmiths manufacturing agricultural tools such as farm implements, weapons of warfare (spears and arrow heads), and beauty products such as ankle rings for married men. The digging of this kind of soil was hard labour. Holes to a depth of 10 feet had to be dug in order to find the right kind of soil. Women participated in the sense that they filled their baskets with the 'iron soil' and brought it back home where it was their job to dry the soil and remove unwanted particles (Silberschmidt 1999:36).

The pottery industry was the other dominant form of indigenous industrial enterprises which not only engaged the services of the women folk during the pre-colonial period but one which also formed part of the informal economy. In Gusiiland, pots were made from clay derived from soapstone (Ocheing' 1974) or from the river. Apart from making pots for domestic use, women also sold some of them to families which lacked the expertise to make them. Apart from pots, there were other domestic and industrial utensils in clay forms which were usually fashioned into objects such as cooking pots, water cans, trays, storage tanks, and other items of various grades and sizes. These products were also used for spiritual activities by herbalists, diviners and herbalists. Among the Gusii, pots were also used in rituals, involving oath taking. For example, parties in a land dispute were required to partake the *rigio* oath. *Rigio* oath involved the breaking of an old pot in a disputed land (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13). However, it has to be noted that Gusii pottery was not done on large scale as was done among the Luo. Production, thus, would not satisfy the demand. It is for this reason that the Gusii continued to buy, through barter trade, pots from Luoland. Thus, pottery was a source of livelihood and formed part of the informal economy among the Gusii and their neighboring Luo.

Gusii women participated in the pre-colonial informal economy not just as vendors but also as instruments of transporting trade goods to the market place. There was no motorized system of transport in those days and most of the merchandise was transported or carried on human heads or shoulders. Gusii women were culturally assigned the role of carrying goods on their heads and men would provide the much-needed security (also a cultural role). The journey by women carrying trade goods on their heads from Gusiiland to Luo-land was long and treacherous. Ochieng' (1974:215) has alluded to the participation of Gusii and Luo women in long distance trade that linked Gusii and Luo in trade network thus:

It was women and children of both tribes who largely handled it, especially during periods of hostilities. Gusii women and children would carry all manner of merchandise deep into Luoland. Similarly, Luo women and children, from Kabondo, Nyakach, Gem or Kamagambo, would travel deep into Gusiiland and no harm would befall them. Men were never keen on travelling outside their clan areas, although there are a number of elders who allege that during their youth- before the Europeans arrived in Gusiiland- they travelled with their fathers to locations like Kanyama, Karugu, Kochia or Karachuonyo, deep in Luoland.

In spite of the burdensome trading ventures the Gusii people did not have an easy alternative. They traded in order to obtain cattle from the Luo through barter trade. Cattle was an important phenomenon in the lives of the Gusii people. It was used for paying dowry, performing rituals and as a source of food (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/18/13; Kenya National Archives, DP/18/11).

#### **Transformation of Gusii Women's informal economy during the colonial era.**

The establishment of the colonial administration in Kenya was accompanied by the enactment of laws and policies which changed the pre-colonial informal economy. The introduction of money as the medium of exchange and the means by which Africans paid taxes to the colonial government was behind much of the evolution and transformation of the Gusii informal economy. Money was also required for paying other government-related services such as education and healthcare. In addition, the importation of clothes/textiles and bicycles from Europe also led the Gusii people, especially women, to want to acquire 'modern' industrial products which they wanted to replace with their traditional goodies such as skins which were used as clothing in precolonial times. More specifically, Gusii women shifted their appetites from wearing skins and bracelets (*ebitinge*) to imported clothes and ornaments. Among the Gusii, *Ebitinge* were the equivalent of marriage wedding rings in the contemporary world (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13) To acquire these things, women needed money. So, while Gusii men sought money to pay taxes to the colonial government, Gusii women needed money too for supplementing men's monetary needs, for paying schools fees and medical care as well as for buying ornaments. By 1913 the Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza Province, observed that the natives were becoming accustomed to the money economy and they were using money, not just for paying taxes but also for obtaining imported goods.

The pushing of trade in the districts and the consequent increase of their demand for imported goods and money, with which to buy them, will help in their evolution to a higher order of things.... There is noticeable an increasing desire to spend money. .... Formerly it was the universal custom to bury rupees. While this practice of hoarding rupees is certainly continued by many of the people whose ambition is to obtain sufficient money to enable them buy female stock, it is undoubtedly a fact that it is not continued in locations where trade had obtained a real hold.... The people are comparatively well to do. Large sums of money are continually circulating... (Kenya National Archives, PC/NZA/1/8, 1913)

The introduction of taxes upon Africans, which was to be paid in monetary terms, contributed a lot in pushing women into the modern-day informal economy. Apart from encouraging women to produce more food crops for sale and for subsistence, taxation pushed most men out of their rural homes to go and search for paid work on European enterprises (by supplying labour in factories, government service, white-owned farms). This created a vacuum in the traditional male-dominated terrain which came to filled-up by women (Maxon 1989).

Colonial taxation forced most Gusii men to seek paid work and this paved way for most Gusii women to enter the informal sector. Tax laws led to massive out-migration Gusii men out of Gusiiland as they went to seek paid work in order to earn money with which to pay their taxes. For example, it was reported in 1914 that wage labour attracted "nearly 4000 men" from South Kavirondo District, Gusiiland included, who "were sent to work outside the [South Kavirondo] district during the 12 month, nearly all on long contracts, 3-6 months" (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/1/2). The introduction

of money led the Gusii, both men and women, to begin to commoditize and commercialize their goods and services which had hitherto been provided free of charge. Communal labour which had been provided free of charge gradually became commoditized. Men were the first people to seek paid work because they were the ones on whose shoulders taxation rested. On the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Gusii men were “dispatched to all parts of the protectorate” (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/1/2).

Most Gusii men who went out of their rural Gusiiland sought work in Public Works Department, Habor and Water works, on fuel cutting for the railway, on irrigation works in the Maasai Reserve, on Railway building at Magadi, and a few on cottonand fibre plantations (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/1/2). Many of the men sought the work voluntarily while others were forced to do so.

Latterly in order to fulfil labor requisitions, force have had to be applied i.e. the young men have been rounded up during the night. Personally, though I dislike resorting to such methods, I fail to see any other course (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/1/2).

The men who went out to seek paid work left their female counterparts to take care of their farms and siblings. The wages which were paid to men were inadequate to cater for the needs of their dependents (women, children and aging parents). As a result, Gusii women started engaging in gainful employment as well as trade in order to meet their needs. Some women became heads of households because their male counterparts died far away while working on colonial projects. While the demand for money pushed Gusii women into the informal sector to earn money through sale of their farm products, the whole scenario was given a boost with the introduction of new crops as examined in the next section.

#### **Impact of new crops on Gusii women’s participation in the informal economy**

The colonial government introduced taxes to achieve many objectives. One of the objective, already discussed above, was to force men to seek paid work and thereby offer cheap labour. The other objective was to manipulate Africans to produce more farm crops which they could sell in order to obtain money for paying taxes. Thus, the establishment of colonial rule in Gusiiland did not just lead to the imposition of taxes but it also led to the introduction and production of new high-yielding crops (Ayuka 2017). Maize is perhaps one such crop which gained prominence among the Gusii women because it was readily saleable. Maize was highly sought after by the government because those who were employed on government projects were fed on maize-flour meal (then popularly known as *posho*). Indian middlemen would purchase maize from Gusii women and sell it to government at a profit. Apart from the introduction of new crops, new farming methods were also introduced and this, together with new farming implements, ensured high production of food crops which would only be disposed off through trade (Ayuka 2017). Some of the newly introduced farming implements were Indian-made hoes (popularly known as *jembes*). These innovations led to increased production and, consequently, increased food stock for both subsistence and sale. Food was sold for local consumption and export (Maxon, 1989). Indeed, the Gusii stepped up production of grains. By 1913, for example, the Gusii were producing more than they could consume from their lands as noted by the District Commissioner thus:

Kisii natives have made considerable progress. The Kisii have cultivated a large amount of sim-sim and some linseed in addition to growing a quantity of native grain in excess of their own requirements. The Kavirondo while not such industrious cultivators as the Kisii, have nevertheless responded to our efforts and there is now a very much large area of land under cultivation that has never been the case the past. The natives with very few exceptions are exceedingly prosperous, partly owing to their own efforts in producing economic products and also owing to the high prices at which they can sell....than was the case a few years ago” (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/1/2).

Gusii women were not just selling farm crops only. They also engaged in selling imported goods as examined in the next section.

#### **Sale of imported Products by Gusii women**

Another aspect of the colonial economy which Gusii women engaged with, was trade in imported products. The Gusii needed money in order to enable them purchase imported goods and services either for personal consumption or for re-sale. By 1909, blankets, beads, and wire imported from Germany and white cloth imported from the United States of America and Bombay were already popular among Africans, Gusii women included. Africans bought other items like hoes, slashes, sugar, salt, flour and rice (Ngesa 1996). Indeed, by 1913, the Gusii had begun buying a few imported goods such as blankets and American clothes as noted in 1913 by the District commissioner thus:



At present the natives generally speaking show little desire to utilize their savings in buying imported goods and with the exception of well-known articles such as iron-wire, beads, hoes, knives and a certain amount of americani and blankets (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/1/2)

The Gusii women of Nyamira needed money to buy beauty products such as beads and clothes which were made available at the market centres by Indian traders. They were able to buy these imported goods by selling farm products to the same Indian traders and they would, in turn, use the money to buy imported goods. More specifically, Gusii women in Nyamira sold vegetables to Indians in the nearby market centres.

Some of the market centers where business transactions took place between Gusii women and Indians include Bonyunyu and Ikonge in North Mugirango, in present Nyamira County and Getembe in the present Kisii Town. From the foregoing, the introduction of imported products as well as increased agricultural production led to the emergence of town and market centers. Urban centers acted as points of facilitating trade in Nyamira. Natives sold their farm produce at urban centers and bought imported products from Asians. Thus, urban centres integrated Gusii women into the global economy through centre-periphery relationship. The emergence of urban centers brought new opportunities for the Gusii women. Even though the Gusii did not reside in urban areas, in the initial years of colonial rule, non-Gusii African tribes such as the Nubians and Somali people were allowed to reside in urban centers with Gusiland.

Urban communities in Gusiland depended on commercial ventures to obtain their food. Some of them depended on traditional beer for their leisure activities. Gusii women engaged in brewing and supplying traditional brews to urban dwellers. In his annual report of the year 1949, for the Nyaribari Location, the chief observed that “during the first few months he found North Mugirango Location had almost deteriorated into worse owing to increase in stock theft...drinking by young men, dragging of girls during the market days, brewing of Nubian Gin... and also there was a big gang of young men who were only doing gambling in open places and tax defaulters...” (Kenya National Archives, DP/1/16, Annual report for the year 1949, Nyaribari Location).

Another opportunity which urban centers provided Gusii women with was in the area of pottery. Europeans enjoyed planting flowers in pots which they bought from Gusii women. The Gusii women would either obtain these pots from the Luo in bulk or they would make some themselves. For example, a letter dated 11<sup>th</sup> May 1928 from the then Acting Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza Province, addressed to the Senior Commissioner for Eldoret stated that “I am sorry to say that the fish lorry failed to call at this office today to fetch the two cases of pottery received from Kisii, though warned to do so last night. Will you instruct the driver to call the next time he comes to Kisumu...” (Kenya National Archives, PC/NZA/3/26/7).

### **Gusii women in Home Craft industry**

Another dimension to the colonial government which entrenched Gusii women in the informal economy was the introduction of the Department of Community Development in 1954. This Department was tasked with the role of training women in home craft courses. Although these courses were intended to reinforce the participation of women in unpaid domestic economy such as cooking, child care, sewing, knitting, embroidery, hygiene and housewifery, among others (Kenya National Archives, DP/1/75, KNA, DP/1/78), some women got a chance to utilize the skills obtained from such courses to generate income. Some of them would make cakes, embroidery textiles and sell them to other women without necessarily going to the market place. Home craft courses were not only unique to Gusii women. At the Kericho Homecraft Centre the women were taught sewing, handcraft, embroidery, knitting, laundry, cookery, housewifery, agriculture, childcare, hygiene, home nursing, first aid marketing and accounts (Kenya National Archives, DP/1/75). Through attendance in these courses, women were encouraged to form groups through which they would get refresher courses and through which they would be accorded a chance to exhibit their finished products and even sell them.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

The informal economy existed among the Gusii in precolonial and colonial times and both men and women participated in it. The establishment of colonial rule in Kenya led to the evolution and transformation of the informal economy and the manner in which women participated in it. Prior to the establishment of the colonial administration, informal economy took the form of barter trade. The establishment of the colonial administration introduced new changes which affected it. In particular, the introduction of money as medium of exchange and the means by which Africans paid their taxes to the

government forced Africans, both men and women, to look for alternative ways of earning money. The importation of industrial products from Britain, especially cloths and other textiles also impressed women to work for money which they would use to access these foreign products.

The colonial government introduced official and formal ways of doing business with the aim of raising revenue and regulating the economy. Businesses which were taxed and regulated were deemed to be legal and thus, favored. Thus, the introduction of a colonial government was key in defining the informal economy as the contrast of the formal economy. In spite of the negative attitude which the colonial government had regarding informal economy, this sector continued to thrive because the formal economy lacked the capacity to absorb all the people who were seeking paid work.

Even though the colonial government acted in a way to suggest that it preferred women to remain domesticated in their low social status compared to men, the fact that the wages and earnings which the formal economy enabled men to earn were not sufficient to enable men to take good care of themselves and their families. Women had to participate in the informal economy in order to supplement earnings of their male counterparts. Coupled with the fact that most men were absent from their rural homes, women seized the opportunity to fill up the vacuum which men had left behind. Most of them became “heads of households” and, thus, breadwinners. Most men who went out to work were absent from their homes for long periods.

From the foregoing, this chapter leads us into making two conclusive statements. Firstly, the informal economy has persisted since the pre-colonial days because it plays an important role and meets an important need, which the formal economy cannot adequately meet, by providing gainful employment to many rural and urban households. Secondly, women have played a key role in the informal economy as it enables them to meet needs which their male counterparts can not meet and because they lack the capital and skills which are mostly required in the formal economy. Thus, the informal economy has the flexibility which enables women to participate in it while, at the same time, meeting their other domestic obligations.

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