

Establishment of Colonialism in Kenya and the Transformation of Women's Roles in Economic Activities in Kiambu County, 1895-1945

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Abstract: Some scholars of history have argued that the establishment of colonialism in Kenya in 1895 impacted negatively on women from an economic front. More specifically, they state that the economic burden on women increased as men migrated in search of paid employment leaving women to cater for their household's economic needs. They have also argued that land, upon which women relied for economic sustenance, was taken away leaving women vulnerable economically. Moreover, the introduction of cash crops also contributed to less land being available to women for the production of food crops. Worse still, the introduction of individual ownership of land through land titling encouraged men to sell their land thereby leaving less land available to women for food production. In general terms, most scholars have held the view that the establishment of colonialism in Kenya disadvantaged women economically by impoverishing them. While this is true, this chapter argues that women confronted the challenges presented by colonialism by transforming their economic roles and, by doing so, they were able to engage positively in economic activities in Kiambu County.

Keywords: Colonialism, Women, Economic Transformation, Kiambu, Kenya.

1. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of colonialism in Kenya led to economic transformation in various spheres. More importantly, it impacted on women's economic roles. In spite of this, the impact of colonialism on women's economic roles remains to be an understudied landscape in Kenya's historiography. By taking Kiambu County as the study area, this chapter argues that the establishment of colonialism in Kenya not only led to economic transformation but also impacted on women's economic roles. As labourers, women in Kiambu contributed to economic transformation through working on farms, transporting farm produce to markets and engaging in trade. While women acquired new economic roles, they still continued to perform old ones (Silberschmidt 1999).

In particular, they continued to perform productive and reproductive roles (Ayuka 2017). Thus, colonialism heralded a new dawn on the transformative power of women on the economies of their respective societies. Colonialism came to Africa in the company of capitalism and the synergy between the two (colonialism and capitalism) introduced changes which, in turn, determined women's contribution to economic transformation. For instance, women's economic role in society increased as men migrated in search of paid work. Paid work enabled men to earn money with which they paid taxes to the colonial government (Silberschmidt 1999, Olenja 1991).

Likewise, the introduction of cash crops, as well as new subsistence crops, meant that women's labour demands on the farm increased. The colonial government encouraged increased production of cash crops and food crops for subsistence and export (Maxon 1992). Women were also expected to sell farm and livestock products on the markets. Thus, European capitalism pushed women to engage in the production of commodities for both local consumption and for export. Maxon

(1992) has posited that the penetration of capitalism, in intensified form, during the colonial period, occasioned the imposition of capitalist mode of production over pre-capitalist mode of production in most African localities. Maxon (2002) refers to this state of affairs as the articulation of modes of production. Thus, women had to provide their labour in both precapitalist and capitalist modes of production (Nasimiya 1985).

In addition, colonialism introduced new items for human consumption, whose acquisition, depended on consumers' purchasing power (in the market place). This, combined with the introduction of taxation, increased the appetite for money. Africans had to work hard by supplying labour required by capitalists and landlords to earn the money with which to buy new commodities as well as pay taxes and other bills (church tithes, school fees, healthcare etc.).

Apart from working for a wage, which was never sufficient to cater for the necessities of life, the African also had to produce and sell farm products (mainly grains and livestock). The economic pressures which the colonial administration imposed on Africans pushed women into new spheres of economic life, and through them, women were able to contribute towards economic transformation of their societies. Generally, there was a disruption in the gendered division of labour (Bulow 1992). This chapter examines four different spheres through which the establishment of colonialism in Kenya transformed women's economic roles.

The first sphere was the founding of Nairobi as Kenya's capital city. The proximity of Kiambu to Nairobi meant that women had to supply the ever-increasing Nairobi population with necessities of life such as food and charcoal. The second sphere was the alienation of large chunks of land in Kiambu for European farmers. Women were required to pick coffee berries on European coffee farms. The third sphere was the establishment of colonial law and order. This contributed to peaceful co-existence between ethnic tribes, some of which constantly attacked each other. The Maasai and the Kikuyu of Kiambu, for example were in a state of constant attacks occasioned by cattle thefts. The establishment of colonialism enabled communities to live harmoniously and engage in economic activities such as trade. Women from Kiambu, who had been vulnerable to inter-ethnic attacks, benefited the most and a great majority of them were able to move about and carry out their economic activities.

The fourth sphere is the outmigration of men out of Kiambu in search of paid work. Outmigration was occasioned by taxation. Men had to seek paid work in order to earn money with which they paid taxes. As more and more men migrated, women were left behind to act as heads of households. Most of them took over the task of making key economic decisions which had hitherto been a preserve of men. Also, men who were employed far from home would send money to their wives. Thus, women invested financial remittances in economic ventures, mostly productive farming and trade.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a historical method of data collection and analysis. Much of the data was collected at the Kenya National Archives. Archival data was supplemented by secondary and oral data. A historical analysis of the data was adopted in order to:

1. Trace economic changes (economic transformation) that took place, upon the establishment of colonial rule in Kenya between 1895 and 1945 and
2. Establish how women participated in these changes and how they were affected by them.

Some of the changes which the study focused on included introduction of taxation by the colonial government, the origin and growth of towns/cities such as Nairobi, alienation of land for European farmers, and the introduction of money as medium of exchange, among others.

Establishment of colonial rule in Kenya and the birth of Kiambu District

Colonialism was officially introduced in Kenya in 1895 (Foran 1962). Before the establishment of colonial rule, Kiambu was sandwiched between the cool, fertile, densely populated and, formerly, thickly forested Kikuyu Uplands and the lower, warmer grassland of the south and east where it borders the Maasai ethnic community (Overton 1988). Establishment of colonial rule in Kenya led to the birth of Kiambu district comprising of African areas and European settled areas. The establishment of colonial rule in Kenya (including in Kiambu) was effected through the imposition of colonial administrators (such as colonial headmen/chiefs, colonial police, District Officers, District Commissioners and Provincial Commissioners) on Africans (Maxon 1989). It was also realized through the introduction of new forms of

legislation (Maxon 1989). In addition to that, the colonial government also invited European farmers to settle in Kenya, including in Kiambu. These farmers needed to be supplied by cheap labour. In order to push Africans in Kiambu to supply cheap labour, the colonial government introduced taxes. Taxes pushed men to seek paid work, mainly on European-owned farms. Thus, the introduction of colonial rule introduced changes which affected women economically. Women's economic transformation in Kiambu was especially realized through the following spheres of change:

1. The establishment of Nairobi as the capital city of Kenya
2. Land alienation that changed ownership of too much land from Africans to Europeans
3. The establishment of peaceful co-existence between Kenya's ethnic communities
4. Out-migration of men from Kiambu in search of paid work

Each of the spheres above is discussed and analyzed separately below. We begin by examining the impact of the origin and growth of Nairobi on women's economic roles.

Origin and growth of Nairobi and the economic transformation of women in Kiambu County

The choice of Nairobi as Kenya's capital city happened after the Uganda Railway reached Nairobi in 1899 (Foran 1962, Owuor and Obudho 1997). According to Blevin and Bouczo (1997) Nairobi's founding was as a result of a colonial project called the Kenya-Uganda Railway line which was built in order to access the newly colonized land that came to be called Kenya. Since Kiambu existed on the outskirts of Nairobi, the origin and growth of Kenya's capital city impacted the women of Kiambu economically. Nairobi witnessed increased rate of urbanization as its population started to balloon at a much faster rate. People migrated into the city in search of employment. Population increase continued until the outbreak of the First World War (1914-1918).

The First World War was a double-edged sword as far as the economic transformation of women in Kiambu was concerned. On the one side, it destabilized the economic foundation of Kiambu District by killing the cash crop economy. Many of the Europeans who were engaged in cash crop farming enlisted in the army. Many of the women of Kiambu who worked on European coffee farms lost their jobs as coffee-berry pickers. On the other side, African males who enlisted in the First World War remitted their earnings back to their women in Kiambu and the women invested the money in agriculture. Time was ripe for women to exploit the opportunities which the War occasioned. The women of Kiambu were hard-pressed to provide the much-needed food supplies to the army personnel most of whom were stationed in Nairobi.

In spite of the fact that the War provided economic opportunities for women to exploit, studies such as that of Olenja (1991) and Nasimiyu (1985) have only focused on the negative impact of male migration on African women. These studies posit that women became overburdened as their male relatives migrated out of Kiambu to serve in the War. As men left Kiambu, women were accorded space within which to maneuver. The combined effect of male outmigration and the growth of Nairobi did provide women in Kiambu with economic opportunities to exploit. Women were left in charge of food production and the expanding city of Nairobi provided the market where women would sell the food.

Coquery-Vidrovitch's (1991) has observed that urban markets create a link between urban and rural settings. In addition, they link rural areas to global markets. Thus, by participating in urban markets as food-sellers, the women of Kiambu became actively linked to global economy as suppliers of industrial raw-materials because some of what they produced on their farms ended up being exported to Europe. By 1929 Nairobi provided the real urban market with economic opportunities which women would exploit. Kiambu township was a District Headquarters "rather than a real town there being only residential plots" (Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/24 Kiambu District Annual Report 1929, P. 12). Unlike in other areas of the Kenya Colony, the women of Kiambu learned the art of trading much earlier and faster. As they increasingly got involved in trade, they pushed Indian traders out of Kiambu. It was reported, by the DC Kiambu, that the reason why payment of non-native poll tax (tax paid by Europeans and Indians) had decreased in Kiambu was because "the Indian population [had] decreased slightly" (Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/24, Kiambu District Annual Report, 1929, P.11).

The women of Kiambu got a boost from the colonial government in the sphere of agricultural production. This was when the government established agricultural plots where both men and women attended agricultural classes (KNA,

MA1/12/22, KDAR, 1927, P.2). The training of Africans in modern methods of farming was also occasioned by the fact that Africans in Kiambu were experiencing scarcity of land (KNA, MA1/12/22, KDAR, 1928, P.2) and in order to help them increase agricultural productivity, it was necessary to train them in that direction. Indeed, agricultural training classes yielded positive results by enabling women in Kiambu to produce more food for subsistence and for trade. This enabled the people of Kiambu to pay their taxes and for their own prosperity. It was reported by the District Commissioner that “prosperity and wealth of the Reserve appears to be on the increase and taxation and cesses are readily paid” (Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/22, Kiambu District Annual Report, 1927, P.2).

Agricultural prosperity was not only experienced in the 1920s. It was also experienced into the 1940s when the Second World War broke out. Like during the First World War, the Second World War also experienced an increase in the population of soldiers in Nairobi. These soldiers needed to be fed. Thus, increased agricultural productivity that Kiambu witnessed in the 1940s came in handy during the Second World War and the “Kikuyu contribution to the War effort” continued to be their “production of vegetables, fuel, charcoal and certain food stuffs” which continued to “flow to the military” (Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/38 Kiambu District Annual Report, 1944, P..2).

The introduction of ox-carts relieved the women of Kiambu by providing alternative means of transport of farm products to the market in Nairobi. Before their introduction, women had been burdened with the task of carrying loads of farm products and other tradeable items on their backs to the market (Ngesa 1996). The DC Kiambu saw an aptitude for trading that the Kikuyu of this Kiambu District had. The DC Kiambu noted that:

Numerous ox-carts have been brought and new ways of making money have been initiated such as sale of wattle bark, sale of firewood, sale of manure besides all the more usual form of trading. As far as one can judge the prevailing characteristics of the Kikuyu of the district are propensity for money making, a thirst for knowledge and a complete inability to be contended (Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/22, Kiambu District Annual Report, 1928, P.4)

Apart from agriculture, the production and consumption of alcohol increased during the Second World War. Much of the production of alcohol was done in Kiambu by women. These women supplied the same alcohol to soldiers in Nairobi. The most famous brand of alcohol which the women of Kiambu manufactured was called Nubian Gin. It was not until 1944 that punishment for manufacture of the Nubian gin came to have a deterrence effect (Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/38 Kiambu District Annual Report, 1944, P. 2).

The growth of Nairobi also witnessed an increase in the number of men than women. This was because of lack of family houses which prevented men from travelling with their families to the city. Several men shared a single room as housing in the city was of the dormitory type. Also, the wages which men were paid in Nairobi were insufficient to support families. As a result, women and children were left in their rural homes to engage in food farming. Being a place with fewer women, Nairobi experienced a surge in prostitution as there were fewer women. Prostitution escalated during the two World Wars when the population of soldiers increased in Nairobi. During the Second World War for example, young women and girls from Kiambu spilled into Nairobi to offer sexual services to army men. The DC for Kiambu noted that the negative effect of the War on the Kikuyu women of Kiambu was the increase of prostitution” (Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/38 Kiambu District Annual Report, 1944, P. 1).

Even though the women of Kiambu reaped a lot of money from this seemingly “immoral” behavior, it came with its own repercussions. Apart from encouraging the spread of venereal diseases, this practice also contributed to “the appearances of half-caste children” who could not get ready acceptance in Kikuyu society” (Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/38 Kiambu District Annual Report, 1944, P. 2). Nonetheless, the money reaped from prostitution did contribute to the economic and social transformation of Kiambu. The next sphere which impacted women’s economic transformation in Kiambu upon establishment of colonial rule in Kenya was the settlement of European farmers. This is discussed in the next section.

Settlement of European coffee farmers in Kiambu and women’s economic transformation

Upon Kenya’s colonization, the administration discovered that Kenya was not endowed with mineral resources. In order to make the Colony pay for its own administration, it was resolved that European farmers should be encouraged to come and settle in Kenya (Maxon 1992). Kiambu is one such area where large chunks of land were alienated for European settlement. Most of the Europeans in Kiambu started cash crop farming. The chief cash crop at the time was coffee. The

demand for African labour peaked during the picking of coffee berries. Coffee-picking was mainly done by women. So, the women of Kiambu were sucked into the global capitalist economy much earlier as labourers on European-owned coffee plantations.

In order to secure a steady supply of African labour on European farms, the colonial government employed two strategies. One was to introduce taxation. These taxes were to be paid in monetary currency. The only avenues through which Africans in Kiambu were to obtain money, with which to pay taxes, was limited to either selling their labour or by selling their farm products.

The other strategy was to deny Africans access to adequate land. As such, a lot of land in Kiambu was alienated for European settlement. Thus, land alienation also had the impact of creating land scarcity in Kiambu. The colonial government created land scarcity in Kiambu deliberately with the aim of pushing men, women and children into search for paid work on European farms. Some of them were allowed to reside on European farms as resident labourers. Whereas men were allowed to migrate from Kiambu in search of paid work, women and children got employed on European farms as coffee pickers. However, the First World War had a negative effect on women's employment as coffee-pickers because most of the European coffee farmers enlisted into the War as soldiers. This, coupled with the economic depression which the War occasioned, led to loss of jobs as productivity and consumption in the coffee sector dropped.

The colonial government was desirous of reviving the cash crop economy after experiencing economic depression during the First World War. Women took advantage of the revival process and many of them sought employment on European farms. The population of native Kikuyu women working on European farms, forest reserve and at Christian Mission stations in Kiambu was fairly higher than that of men in 1927 (see table below, Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/22, Kiambu District Annual Report, 1928, P.4). This is bearing in mind that the same women had children to take care of in their respective areas of employment.

Table 1: Native population of Kikuyu women in the Native reserves and on European farms in 1927

	Men	Women	Children	Total
Native [population in Native Reserve Area	21192	23527	34972	79691
Native population on Farms, missions, Forest reserve etc	6577	6749	10036	23362
Total	27769	30276	45008	103063

Source: (Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/22, Kiambu District Annual Report, 1928, P.4)

The 1930s witnessed global recession and crops which depended on global market were adversely affected. Their demand on the global scene dropped. Coffee was not the only cash crop which recorded a drop in production. Wheat and Sisal production also dropped by 50 per cent while coffee recorded a drop of 40 per cent in 1931 (Ngesa 1996). Additionally, there was a fall in rural and urban employment which affected mostly men. Worse still, Employment on tea Estates fell from about 10,000 to 8,000 in the same period, and many sisal estates were closed down (Ayuka 2017). Consequently, many Africans who were formerly engaged as labourers were laid off and the wages of those employed, fell drastically. Following the economic depression, which affected mainly cash crops, the women of Kiambu turned to selling food crop.

Unfortunately, food-crop farming required access to land. The settlement of European farmers in Kiambu had occasioned land scarcity. This scarcity was heavily experienced in the 1920s and 1930s. The women from Kiambu migrated in search of land for crop-farming in other areas. Many senior Kenyan colonial administrators were ready to abet and legitimize these population shifts as a way to stabilize and rationalize the reserve system by relieving pressure in the most densely settled native locations (Parsons 2011). Thus, this was the basis upon which the colonial administration allowed Kikuyu settlement in other areas of Kenya. With an annual population growth of 2.5 percent and a population density of over 280 people per square mile, by the 1920s the Kikuyu reserves (of which Kiambu District was part) had become dangerously overcrowded (Parsons 2011).

Many Kikuyu women and their families started migrating from Kiambu in large numbers. Some of them went to Narok District where they inter-married with the Maasai. Others went to the expansive and fertile Rift Valley region where they heavily got engaged in crop farming and wage labour. Some of them engaged in trade. Women who migrated from Kiambu to Kisii got engaged in trade. They traded at Tinga Market, Keroka Market, Ikonge Market and Bonyunyu Markets (Ayuka 2017). The other sphere which impacted women's economic transformation upon establishment of colonial rule in Kenya was the establishment of colonial law and order. This is discussed in the next section.

Establishment of colonial law and order and the economic transformation of women Kiambu

Maxon (1989) and Ochieng' (1974) have documented how Gusii women who were involved in long distance trade with the Luo used to be attacked. Before the establishment of colonial rule in Kenya, ethnic communities were in a constant state of attacking each other and protecting their territories from attacks. Such was the case between the people of Kiambu and their Maasai neighbors. Lawrence (1968) has observed that "the first meeting of the two tribes about 1750, the Masai inflicted great damage on the Kikuyu while both were resident on the plains near Mount Kenya".

However, this does not imply that the two ethnic communities were always in a fighting mode. They intermarried and traded with each other at certain times, especially during famine. The establishment of colonial rule in Kenya brought with it colonial law and order which enabled peaceful co-existence between the people of Kiambu and their neighbors. This peace was instrumental in fostering economic transactions between co-existing communities. Thus, colonial law and order minimized attacks on women trading convoys.

During precolonial period the women of Kiambu had been heavily involved in trade with their neighbors, especially the Maasai and the Kamba communities (Muriuki 1969). Trade between these communities peaked during famines or other ecological disasters (Musalia 2010). The establishment of colonial rule and the provision of colonial law and order enabled the women of Kiambu to scale-up their trade with their neighboring communities. The establishment of the colonial police as well as other legal instruments of justice (laws, courts and prisons), led to a reduction in inter-ethnic attacks. People's movement were restricted by the colonial administration, but when such movement was allowed, people migrated from one place to another with little prospect of being attacked.

Also, the colonial government embarked on improving transport infrastructure especially roads and the railway. The colonial transport infrastructure shortened the time people took to transport their trade items from one place to another. Transport infrastructure also enabled the deployment of security personnel to places which experienced lawlessness. The combination of colonial law and order on one hand and the development of transport infrastructure on the other brought about peaceful coexistence between communities which had hitherto fought each other.

Apart from traveling to exchange goods, women from Kiambu also traveled in search of farmlands in other areas such as those traditionally deemed as Maasai territories. This is bearing in mind that much of the land in Kiambu had been alienated for European settlement. Indeed, many of them migrated and settled in the expansive Rift Valley region where many Europeans had settled for farming. While in Rift Valley, Kiambu women were able to access European farms as squatter labourers (Resident Labourers). Under the Resident labourers scheme, Africans were allowed to settle on part of the European farms in exchange for their labour. They were allowed to use part of the European farms, where they also kept fewer numbers of livestock. Part of the wealth which Kiambu women amassed in Rift Valley was repatriated back in Kiambu. The next section examines how the establishment of colonial rule in Kenya impacted women's economic transformation through the sphere of outmigration of men.

Women were left to make key household economic decision when men left their homes in search of paid work.

Nzomo (1997) and Kiamba (1997) have decried the low level of women's participation in decision-making processes which is usually attributed to cultural and structural factors. Structurally and culturally, men were the heads of households and, as a result, were responsible for making key economic decisions. This was mainly the case during the pre-colonial period. Even though women's participation in decision-making was at a lower level when colonialism was established in Kenya, colonialism itself created avenues which led women to get involved in economic decision-making processes. One of the avenues which created an opportunity for women to get involved in decision-making was through taxation. The introduction of taxation by the colonial government was intended to compel men to search for paid work. Paid work provided men with the money they needed to pay taxes with.

As most men left Kiambu, women were left as temporary heads of their households. In some cases, migration of women left women as permanent heads of their households since most men died while away in employment. Most of them died while serving in the two World Wars. Killingray (2001:427) has posited that the “mortality rate among carriers and porters, mainly from disease, malnutrition and official neglect was between ten and twenty percent”. Others suffered bodily injuries and returned to their families with permanent disabilities.

As a result, most women took over male economic functions. Also, Women in Kiambu received financial remittances from their husbands (who were away in employment) which they used to invest in economically productive ventures. In most cases, financial remittances were invested in farming. This ensured that women increased farm productivity and, consequently, trade in food stuffs. The need to increase farm productivity was occasioned by the fact that there was increased demand for food, especially during the Second World War. In 1945, for example, the DC-Kiambu noted that:

There have been enormous demands for commodities which can be produced locally, and at the same time there have been restrictions on the importation of essential commodities from other districts (Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/39, Kiambu District Annual Report, 1945, pp. 2).

Most of the farm products were sold in the ever-expanding Nairobi city. During the first and second World Wars, most of the African men from Kiambu were employed in the army. Even though most men from Kiambu declined to join the army, the colonial government increased taxes in order to push them into the army. For example, the Hut and Poll Tax Ordinance was amended in 1915 thereby giving the Governor powers to “increase the respective taxes to a sum not exceeding five rupees per annum in each case, within such district, area or place” (East African Protectorate 1915). Increased taxes pushed men to join the army.

Apart from seeking paid work in the army, some men from Kiambu moved to Nairobi to seize opportunities provided by the War. It was reported by DC Kiambu that some men from Kiambu “found an easy and well-paying living in Nairobi” Kenya National Archives, MA1/12/39, Kiambu District Annual Report, 1945, page 1). Ayuka (2017) has also underscored the positive impact of male-outmigration on women’s social status when she states that women became independent, because men went away for years or even forever. As a result, women became heads of households and sole providers for the non-working members of their families.

3. CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the three spheres through which the establishment of colonial rule in Kenya impacted on women’s economic transformation in Kiambu District. The first sphere is the founding of Nairobi as the capital city of Kenya. The city’s ever-growing population triggered trade between the City and its Kiambu neighborhood. Women from Kiambu seized economic opportunities which the capital city generated. The women of Kiambu supplied food to the City’s population as well as other essential services such as charcoal, milk, and vegetables among other things. Since, Nairobi did not have family houses, it was mostly men who were allowed to migrate and stay in Nairobi as labourers. These men lacked the comforts of home. Some women from Kiambu seized the opportunity and provided “comforts of home”. These were generally labelled as prostitutes. In fact, during the World Wars, the influx of male soldiers in Nairobi heightened the demand for women prostitutes.

The second sphere which impacted on women’s economic transformation in Kiambu was land alienation and the settlement of European farmers in Kiambu. The demand for labour, especially, coffee pickers, worked in favour of women in Kiambu. Coffee picking was mainly done by women and children.

The third sphere, examined in this chapter, which impacted on women’s economic transformation in Kiambu was the founding of colonial law and order. This cultivated peaceful co-existence between the women of Kiambu and their different neighboring communities such as the Maasai and the Kamba. The result was free movement of Kiambu women to these places and these promoted trade between them and other ethnic communities.

Lastly, outmigration of men from Kiambu in search of paid work left women as heads of households. Financial remittances which women received from their husbands (working far away from home) was invested in economic ventures. Outmigration of men from Kiambu had two important dimensions with regard to women’s economic transformation. Firstly, women had an opportunity to undertake economic roles which culture had prevented them from doing. Secondly, women became key decision-makers at the household level. As a result, women were economically empowered as decision-makers and they became unbounded by culture.

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