Jumuga Journal of Education,
Oral Studies, and Human Sciences (JJEOSHS)
editor@jumugajournal.org
http://www.jumugajournal.org
Volume 8, Issue 2, 2025
https://doi.org/10.35544/jjeoshs.v8i2.132

Food Production Mechanisms and Gender Relations:

Retracing Precolonial Maragoli, Western Kenya

Alex Amisi Muhandale
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7003-8820
Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya
&
Kizito Lusambili Muchanga, PhD
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5430-4558
Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya
&
Pontian Godfrey Okoth, PhD
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8369-9029
Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

Abstract
This article sets out to explore the manner in which gender relations and food production in pre-colonial Maragoli are inter-twinned. It is encased on the premise that the clearly defined gendered roles in food production assisted the pre-colonial Maragoli society (a prominent subgroup of the larger Luhya nation of Kenya) to meet her food demands. In its methodology and research design, the article utilises both the primary and secondary sources, within a historical-analytical research design. Regarding its findings, the article asserts that the pre-colonial Maragoli society had an established food production mechanism with a balanced gender contribution of both men and women. This ensured that the society produced adequate food for all. The article thus concludes that gender and food production are inseparable hence the failure to give gender-relations a fair attention in food production jeopardizes food security.

Key words: Food production, gender relations, and pre-colonial, Maragoli

1. Introduction

The Maragoli's (a prominent subgroup of the larger Luhya nation of Kenya) food production mechanisms are a historical and contemporary by-products of a well-organized land use and farming practices. Such an elaborate land use was founded on a land tenure system that was characterized by communal control of land and its resources. Though land was communally owned at the general level, it was individually tilled at the family level. The basis of land administration was the customary law which was executed by the elders who had the overall powers over it as a production resource.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Food security has remained the pillar of human civilization and sustainable development. In pre-colonial Maragoli society, food production was central to both economic survival and social organizations, structured around a gendered division of labour that reflected broader cultural norms and power dynamics. As a patriarchal society, men typically controlled land ownership and livestock; and indeed, key assets in the Maragoli's agrarian economy. On the other hand, women were primarily responsible for crop cultivation, food processing, and household sustenance.

In regard to the African studies on food production, most of studies have tended to concentrate on climate and technological issues as the main units of analysis. However, since food production is a human endeavour, the role played by both men and women in their gendered nature can never be ignored in such an undertaking. It is with such a lacuna in

mind that this research article picked gender as the key tool of analysis to analyse the Maragoli pre-colonial food production mechanisms. These gendered mechanisms of food production were not static. They laid the foundation for enduring inequalities that were later exacerbated by colonial disruptions, including the introduction of food production mechanisms and its relevant gendered perspectives.

1.2 Research Objective

To analyse the gendered nature of pre-colonial Maragoli food production mechanisms.

II Theoretical Frame work

2.1.1 Gender Analysis

This research article was guided by the theoretical proponents of gender analysis, which problematizes gender relations in the on-going struggles between local actors over meaning and control of strategic resources and relationships. Through gender analysis, a focus is put on the complex interactions of power, knowledge and agency on the analysis of gender relations and struggles. (Reeves, et al., 2000).

iii. Methodology

Subjects & selection method: The study population was drawn from Maragoli men and women aged between forty and ninety-nine years.

Study Design: This was a historical research.

Study Location: The study was carried out in Maragoli land-the current Sabatia and Vihiga Sub counties, Vihiga County in Western Kenya.

Study Duration: August 2023 to January 2024

Sample size: The research interviewed 22 major respondents

Inclusion criteria: Elders from Maragoli-land-These respondents proved useful in providing the necessary information on the gender roles of both men and women in Pre-colonial Maragoli.

Exclusion criteria: Individuals below 40 years, Adults above 100 years.

Results and Discussion:

The place of Land in Pre-colonial Maragoli Food Sub Sector

Land was the prime resource among the Maragoli. This stemmed from the fact that the Maragoli were able be co-joined with all human potentialities both in the physical and supernatural through land. The Maragoli for example used the land endowments to connect to their spiritual deity through sacrifices and venerations. Land products were greatly depended on in solidifying the social relations. Key among them was dowry which was used in cementing marriage relations. Moreover, land provided them with both animal and crop products that were used to politically persuade and solicit the people's favour for political ascendance to power through admission to the council of elders. Besides, land remained the most important economic resource since all food and other essentials for human sustenance were all derived from land (Mambai FGD).

As an agricultural community, land was an important source of livelihood for them. It was not only demonstrate riches but was also a source of wealth (Chavakali FGD). A man who owned land was referred to as *Omwene mulimi* (land owner) and was highly respected (1917/18 KNA: DC/NN.1/2, Amisi, 2021). Land ownership and use was therefore of great significance to the Maragoli since their lives depended on how prudent they made use of this inordinate resource. Both men and women were assigned gendered roles in order to ensure optimum use of land. This notwithstanding, women played a crucial role in the agricultural process. For example, land as a fundamental resource for crop and animal production was designated in diverse uses with women in mind (Omwoyo, 2008). The arable land was basically divided into three main parts. The first portion was land on which a family homestead was located and on which a man's wife or wives carried out their respective farming activities. The second was land that the patriarch cultivated for his private use or as security so as to eschew food shortage. This too, was divided out for each wife (among polygamous families), although the produce was considered as the patriarch's property. The third portion, consisting of all the remaining land, was communal and belonged to the clan. Women could gather fruits, firewood, vegetables and medicinal plants as they wished. It has been found that the survival of humankind can be seen as due to the 'woman-the-gatherer' than to 'man-the-hunter' activities, thus making women's productivity the precondition of most of the human productivity (Mies, 2014).

Women linkage to marriage, whether polygamous or monogamous enabled them access land. Among the pre-colonial patrilineages, Maragoli included, women obtained land rights only through either fathers or husbands (Ndege,

2012). More significantly, marriage was a means of establishing households. Through marriage, children and especially the sons got access to land which was the main source of food production. Decisions on who cultivated in a particular piece were made by clan heads but often resulted from discussions in the family and clans. This was mostly guided by customs that took into account the need of various persons in the group. Gender, age, and position in the clan were all factors that played a role (Kimathi, 2016).

The main reason why the pre-colonial Maragoli women were not owning land was that land issues were always under protests and war confrontations. In order to safeguard the land from such, it was only the young men who had the advantage of teaming up especially after circumcision as an age-set (*irikura*) (Chavakali FGD). The women on the other hand did not have a binding military wing to provide such. More-over, even if women could have formed such a wing, upon marriage such a wing would have been disrupted due to the girls getting married off to different places (Amisi, 2021). Concerning the Agikuyu women, Louis Leakey observes that in the ordinary course of any event it is true that a Kikuyu woman did not inherit or own property (Musalia, 2010).

The cultural explanation to the prohibition of Maragoli women from property ownership was that their gender role was primarily to concentrate on food production. This was achieved through the management of the household farm. Hence, women only exploited the husband's lands but were not entitled to any land rights. This fact placed women in a strategic position to mitigate the effects of famines (Gathogo 2007a, Gathogo 2007b). Marxist feminists argue that women are exploited through the ownership and inheritance of property which is rooted in the patriarchal society. For the case of Maragoli the ownership of property created a hierarchical order that placed women at the lower end of the social ladder. This was not necessarily the subordination intonated by the capitalist scholars. African land was always under contest and external attacks. The males were therefore obligated to ensure the territorial peace and tranquility. This explains why in the pre-colonial Maragoli men compared to women, played a minor role in daily farm management practices to solely concentrate on safeguarding the land militarily (*Wu Mulalu* FGD). In the African communities, men took up jobs that required physical energy such as felling down trees, building and constructing houses and granaries and hunting which became their specialization (Musalia 2010). Generally, the African woman was responsible for both productive and reproduction tasks. And was not only the case in Maragoli but cuts across all pre-colonial African societies.

Land could shift from one homestead's use to the other with the council of elders' permission and with the approval of the elders. Such belonged to an evicted clansman or an elder who could not cultivate it for one reason or another for example old age. For such to be used by another individual, negotiations had to be held between the owner and the prospective user. The agreement was witnessed by the council of elders and the neighbours just in case the grantee claimed full rights in future, the facts of the case could easily be verified (Wagner, 1956). A son had rights to bar his father or brother from granting land to another person on the grounds that the deal was harmful to his or some other family rights. This was however very rare. Such cases were only permitted on the grounds that the father had proved irresponsible and adamant to pick the council of elders' advice after a number of sermons. Moreover, family members or an elder or son had power to stop a brother or father from granting land to a third party (Chavakali FGD).

Hunting and gathering

Even before incorporating agriculture into their main stream economic sphere, hunting and gathering formed the basis of the Maragoli food production system. Hunting and gathering as a system of appropriation of subsistence from nature is universal and was practiced as late as the nineteenth century in Kenya (Chavakali FGD, Wagner1956). Even after adopting agriculture into their economic sphere of their life, the Maragoli supplemented their agricultural proceeds with hunting and gathering. Hunting played an important role in providing the diet of the community. Meat that was consumed in the household was mainly from hunting and rarely from domestic livestock which were generally left to multiply and only slaughtered during important occasions.

The Maragoli practiced hunting and gathering to supplement the main stream economic activities such as livestock keeping and crop cultivation. The leader of the hunting group (*Umwimili wu ruhitsi*) had the duty to organize the hunters especially the hunting rules, days and ground (Mambai FGD). Hunting was basically a male activity while gathering of vegetables, herbs, fruits and insects was mainly done by the female folk. The pre-colonial Maragoli women played a vital role in receiving the men after the hunting (Ibid). The women also during gathering would identify certain hunting grounds which the men due to one reason or the other had failed to notice. Furthermore, women cooked meat brought home from the hunting activity. This confirms that though hunting was dominated by men, women too played a role.

According to D.A Nyakwaka, hunting among the Luo just like the Maragoli, was considered as a profession and was done by hunters (*avahitsi*) who had acquired hunting skills from *umwimili wa vahitsi* through apprenticeship (Nyakwaka 2013). *Omuhitsi* hunted game such as wild pigs (*tsimbitsi*), antelopes (*tsiswara*), alligator (*tsimburu*), buffalo,

gazelles, zebra, warthogs, ant-bears and hippos as a source of regular supply of protein for domestic consumption. *Avahitsi* were required to carry spears (*matimu)*, clubs (*vigong'o)*, knives, bows and arrows. The dogs which had special training in hunting especially male dogs accompanied *avahitsi* to hunting venues which were bushes and near water bodies where the animals resided (*Wu-Mulalu* FGD). There were also some outstanding female dogs which were out of the lactation period were also included in the hunting. The pre-colonial Maragoli had special hunting techniques which were applied to kill different animals. Women gathered a variety of wild fruits, wild vegetables, medicinal herbs and insects. Wild fruits and vegetables included *mutere* (*Amaranthus* spp.), *risutsa* (*Solanum nigrum*) and Mito (*Crototaria bre videns*). The herbs were used to treat children whenever they experienced fever or intestinal problem. Women were also treated for infertility (*uvugumba)* recurrent miscarriage, and eased childbirth and psychosomatic disorders.

Honey was also harvested from the forest though at times the bee-hives (*miring)* could be placed on trees far away in the forest. The bee hive was fixed up in a well scented tree in the forest where bees could be attracted. Sheep's fat (*ikivana)* was smeared in the hive so as to help attract bees into the bee-hive. The honey was collected at night by men using a flaming fire torch (*ekegenga*) made of a bundle of sticks tied together which burn very slowly providing bright light. Honey harvesting technique had been borrowed from the Kalenjin neighbourhood and hence the domination of the practice among the Maragoli neighbouring the Kalenjin group.

The Pre-colonial Maragoli Agriculture

The Maragoli society was primarily crop cultivators with crops such as *ovoro* (finger millet), *maduma* (maize), *mavere* (sorghum), *mungu* (pumpkins), *mabwoni* (sweet potatoes) and *miogo* (cassava) dominating their cultivation (Mambai FGD). Animal keeping also played a secondary though still significant role. Clearing virgin lands of trees and bush was the work of men. For first ploughing, a long digging stick (*omulo*) was used. It is worth noting that agriculture and women in Maragoli were two inseparable entities. The Maragoli agricultural calendar was dominated by food crops which were principally grown and taken care of by women. Even the subsidiary season planting activities depended highly on women labour for success with men coming in to offer a hand especially in moments of crisis. The various duties assigned to Maragoli men and women members ensured food production as a process ran efficiently.

Indigenous crops characterized the Maragoli pre-capitalist mode of production. These include finger millet, sorghum, sweet potatoes, arrow roots, pigeon peas, guavas, and pumpkins (Amisi, 2021). Maize was probably a recent introduction in the 1890s to the people of Western Kenya as it had a very limited use. This is well confirmed by Hay when he pointed out that Lord Lugard visited Kavirondo in 1890, and saw "little or no maize." There are others who hold the view that Captain Frederick Lugard did not visit Kavirondo in 1890. While he did lead an expedition from the coast in late 1889 and early 1890, his expedition penetrated only as far as Muchako's in Ukamba. His main mission in 1890 was to secure British interests in Uganda, and while he passed through regions that would become part of Kenya, his primary focus and destination were further north towards Uganda. Besides, Grant's (1965:216-219) study posits that those who were travelling to Kenya's neighbour (Uganda) first observed "the existence of maize in central Buganda and Bunyoro by 1862 and in Acholi by 1880". Thus, it seems possible that maize travelled along the main trade routes from Buganda and Bunyoro to Mumias from where it later spread to the other parts of Kavirondo (Hay, 1975).

The gender role demarcation was emphasized through a number of Maragoli cultural norms. There were women who took over the responsibilities of their husbands and grew what was considered as men crops such as fruit trees and bananas. These women were given titles ridicule their manlike tendencies. These titles included the bearded woman (*mukari wi tsinderu*). Once given such a title, their women folk would disassociate with them denying such women the necessary women network for manoeuvring through various women related discussions. Such ridicule ranged from being made subjects in mockery songs especially during women dominated activities like weddings and also being side-lined from women led community activities and celebrations. The prudent home keepers were always used as points of reference in the community and even preserved in praise songs (Mamabai FGD). That food crop production was an important economic activity for the Maragoli long before colonial rule is evidenced by the fact that before 1887, the Maragoli supplied large quantities of foodstuffs to the Arab and Swahili trade caravans from the coast (Hobley, 1903).

By the time the British arrived in Maragoliland in the last decade of the 19th century, the Maragoli had established a habit of growing surplus foodstuffs for exchange. By the turn of the twentieth century, Maragoli had built up trade and commerce to supply caravans with food supplies. The foodstuffs produced and sold to the caravans included sugarcane, millet, maize, beans and bananas. Kabira (1993) observes that women's responsibilities were sometimes overwhelming (Kabira et.al. 1993). To reduce the workload, small women groups were formed within communities to enhance labour capacity for agricultural work. The working groups provided food for subsistence and this formed a feature of the pre-capitalist mode of production. During the oral interviews, an informant noted that women could sometimes get help from

relatives or friends through the work groups (*uvufuva)* and *ifisti* which were made up of many women from different households in the village who took turns to go to each other's field. A times the work groups were formed on friendship basis (Mambai FGD). A woman who failed to keep good relationship with her peers failed to get incorporated into such group activities.

The produce from the field was kept in the granaries. In a polygamous home, each woman had her own house and it follows, therefore, that each woman had her own land which she cultivated, and therefore her own granaries. Whatever was kept in the granaries was regarded as the women's property, for it was them alone who could climb the granaries to get the grains. Children could be sent there to get the grain but never a man. This was part of the Maragoli gender relations structures to empower a wife of a particular household to fully control the food sub sector and only brief the husband on the status of the food reserve in the home. The mischievous men who went into the granaries to check the food status were ridiculed through songs and a times side-lined from serious male council matters and even branded women. The laws of the society forbade a man from entering the granaries; it was a taboo (FGD Chavakali). By this action, the law held the woman solely responsible and in charge of agricultural produce and by sanctifying it, she was given complete economic autonomy. Due to the need to avoid wrangles, and ensure hard work and independence of each household especially in a polygamous family set up, the pre-colonial Maragoli did not have a communal granary for the whole homestead.

Women have often been referred to as producers, reproducers, consumers and managers of the environment. As producers, Maragoli women were the primary source of labour which the family unit relied on to avail adequate food from both the on-farm activity of cultivation and off farm activities ranging from trade, crafts and gathering of wild fruits and tubers. As reproducers, the Maragoli society through polygamous marriage, heavily relied on the woman labour force to bring forth the required labour through procreation. It was through procreation that many descendants who were to carry on the societal obligations were brought forth. A man who had died without descendants was not valued (Ndege 1987). It was assumed that he had never lived. Women played an important role in the reproduction of lineage members and to underline role, the children of a polygamous home were known by their mother's names (Mambai FGD). The numerical strengths of lineages was important for production and defence purposes. The Maragoli women role as consumers was brought out beginning from the relationship that the Maragoli society established with land as the primary resource. To begin with, in Maragoli, land was divided based on the number of wives a man had. This was because, it was expected that it was these wives who would make use of the land. Additionally, upon clearing a bush land, the Maragoli men first gave priority to the newly Married men to pick a bigger portion then the rest followed. This was on the belief that the newly married man required more land not only to produce more food for his expanded family but also had acquired more users or labour-force which would help him plough more land.

Maragoli women finally as managers were expected to come up with prudent strategies to help them organize their households to maximize food production. It is due to such expectations that the prudent Maragoli women would carefully isolate their best seeds after harvest and preserve them for the next planting season. In the same vein, Maragoli women, as managers, always moved around within the village and outside in order to tap the best agricultural practices, including the acquisition of the best crop varieties. After getting such varieties, the women would come experiment them and if proved better than their original stock, the women would domesticate the improved varieties. This was a mark of prudent management. Among the good qualities of crop varieties sought by these Maragoli women included fast maturing ones to cushion their families from famine, drought and pest resistant varieties and finally the varieties with high yields to increase their family seasonal harvests (Mambai FGD). Upon marriage for example, the bride would be given a heifer to take care of as a manager and out of her shrewd and competent management, the father-in-law expected that this daughter in law would be in position to take care of this animal up to a time of maturity to enable his grandsons and daughters get their daily milk for subsistence. As the family managers, the Maragoli women nursed their families in their position as family doctors and physicians. Most of the herbalists in Maragoli just like many other Luhya communities were women (Muchanga 1998). Upon the birth of a child, a Maragoli woman was expected to know the various herbs which would protect the new born and ensure that the child was safe. This duty extended to the entire family; a married woman was to regularly check her children and even husband and give the necessary herbal prescriptions as a way of managing their health (Ibid). It is due to this unique place that Maragoli women occupied in agricultural production that explains why women dominated pottery and acquisition of baskets which were the principal storage facilities among the Maragoli. Though the Maragoli kept livestock, their primary economic activity was agriculture and animal products especially meat was rarely consumed apart from during important ceremonial functions.

The family provided the core of the agricultural labour though work parties could be used when work was pressing. As the head of her own hut, a woman directed her children to work on her assigned portion of land. A man

worked on his piece of land but at times he asked his dependents to give a hand. This was more of a command than a request. The wives would not disregard the authority of the husband. Agricultural chores were gendered but flexibility was accommodated. Men cleared all virgin land, brushwood and undergrowth vegetation. They were also required to hoe fallow land because it was considered harder than even the virgin land. After the men had dug the ground, women followed immediately to do the harrowing (*kuvusa/kumusa*). However, a man had first to apportion the land he had cleared to his wife/wives before the harrowing was done to reduce conflicts (Wagner, 1956).

It was the duty and responsibility of a man to ensure that each of his wives had sufficient land on which to grow foodstuffs for her children. To safeguard against total loss of harvest, the cultivated land was spread over different villages. Each woman had to harrow her portion in preparation for planting. Women used small digging sticks to harrow the fields while bending from the hips. Men did not bend but squatted as they did any harrowing. It was rare for men to harrow though there was no taboo in doing so.

Given that food crop production among the Maragoli was gendered, women were responsible for seasonal crops such as beans while men grew perennial crops such as bananas. However, division of crop production along gender was not rigid. Due to this gender delineation, some crops were identified with either female or male cultivators. Women cultivated legumes; pigeon peas, green grams, kidney bean, maize, sorghum and millet, bananas, yams, cassava, gourds, tobacco and sweet potatoes were planted and cared for by men. Maragoli food was enriched by a variety of green leaves like pumpkin leaves (*riseveve, enderema, mutere, ritunde)* and cowpeas (*rikuvi)* (Wu Mulalu FGD).

Women also planted other legumes, pigeon peas (*tsinjugu*), cowpeas (*rikuvi*) and green-grams (*mmbochi*). Being a slow growing crop, pigeon peas were planted during the short rains but were harvested after the next long rains. Cowpeas were planted during the long rains but at harvest, the stalls were left to regenerate during the short rains since its leaves were used as a vegetable. Beans were often inter-cropped with, for instance, maize and since they matured fast, they were handy during periods of shortage, just before maize was harvested. These beans were planted during both short and long rain seasons (Ibid).

Other than land, labour was the other crucial factor of production that the Maragoli had to access to make their agricultural activity a reality. The ability of farmers to access and control labour as a key productive resource was inextricably intertwined with diverse and multiple experiences of individuals as wives, co-wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, daughters-in-law and widows and in general as men and women.

As mentioned earlier, upon marriage, a woman's labour was transferred from her relations to the matrimonial relations. The men in the matrimonial family personified by the husband had the right to appropriate a woman's labour (Wu Mulalu FGD). Apart from crop cultivation, the precolonial Maragoli was also a pseudo pastoral society and therefore animal husbandry played a pivotal role in Maragoli food production. The role of cattle was not as important as among their neighbours the Luo and the Nandi. Cattle were used in officialising marriages through bride-wealth (*uvukwi*) and also served as a source of food during celebrations. The Maragoli also kept goats and sheep and these were herded by boys. Livestock was an indicator of wealth and therefore an important part of the traditional exchange economy. Livestock production was governed by laws pertaining to ownership and alienation, inheritance and use of livestock (KNA: DC/EN/3/3/2:1932:12, Amisi, 2021).

Livestock keeping was more valued in terms of social qualities as well as their economic values. Those people who kept large herds of cattle were held in great respect because livestock was the most prestigious thing to possess (Mambai FGD, Mwikali et.al. 2021). In other words, animal wealth defined the economic status of a person. Hence, livestock were 'vital determinants to a man's positioning in the ladder of economic status which most men wished to climb at some time in their lives. According to Charles H. Ambler, wealth and influence were inextricably intertwined in the pre -colonial African societies (Ambler, 1988). Since land was freely available, prosperity and security depended essentially on access to and control over labour. A fact that was illustrated in the popular Akamba and general African aphorism that *andu ni indo* (meaning "people are the real wealth") (Gathogo 2008). In this case, human as wealth went build livestock and other treasures. In addition, livestock was also an important form of saving in the Maragoli economy. At the subsistence level, cattle provided the essential foods which included meat, milk, ghee, blood and butter. The herd also acted as a bank from which resources could be drawn to satisfy some needs like buying grains in times of food scarcity. In case of a severe famine, cattle would be exchanged with grains (Amisi, 2021).

The Pre-colonial Maragoli Crafts

In pre-colonial Maragoli, agricultural technologies ranged from craft to industries like blacksmithing, Smithery, and Siderurgy which supplemented cultivation and pastoral activities. Some of these activities particularly iron working were full time occupations carried out by specialists who had learned the skill through apprenticeship. The products of the

crafts and industry like pottery items and tools and weapons produced by blacksmiths provided a basis for exchange as they formed the items of trade. They also provided important agricultural farm implements and storage facilities like hoes (*tsimbago)* and baskets (*tsingungi)*. Pottery, a skilful art was mainly undertaken by women from the Vaani clan who were specialized in it (Wagner, 1956). As an art, it enhanced agricultural production. Pots were used for carrying, storing and cooking.

Pre-capitalist Maragoli economy was also characterized by basic industries. Such industry and art relied on the local available resources. Culturally men specialized in basketry and women in pottery. The baskets were made from a variety of materials such as sisal (*makonge)* and papyrus reeds (*mafunzu)*, which were processed, left to dry, then separated into small threads and twisted to make baskets (*tsingungi*). Women also made calabashes (*vimuga*) from gourds which were either big or small in size. One could intersect a calabash into two halves, and one half was referred to as *kisanda*. The *kisanda* had different functions; the big sized ones were used by women for winnowing grains. The small ones were used for serving porridge and local liquor, and also fetching water from the rivers and wells. Notably, the *kisanda* for serving porridge had power relations around it. For instance, there was a specific *kisanda* for serving the head of the family while the rest were shared by women and children (Chavakali FGD).

The Pre-colonial Maragoli Distribution, Trade and Exchange Relations

The subsistence orientation of the Maragoli economy did not imply the absence of surplus for exchange or trade. Although people reproduced for the purpose of consumption and reproduction, there existed produce in excess of what was actually required. It is this excess produce which constituted a surplus. That it existed implied that there was surplus labour; that is the amount of time spent in work by the productive class, men, women and juniors, in excess of time required to reproduce themselves at the existing level of the means of production (Amisi, 2021).

The volume of surplus produce was limited by the relatively low levels of technology and the small-scale organization of the labour force. Some of the surplus produce was exchanged by families for livestock, implements for cultivation and other commodities. Some of it was loaned to relatives (*kusuminya*), who because of misfortune were unable to harvest sufficient produce. Visiting friends and relatives were also given some food staffs as a general gesture of hospitality (Mambai FGD). This was on the understanding that it was part strengthening the kinship system and they would also reciprocate if similar misfortune befell their benefactors. Part of the surplus was also used for the preparation of beer which members of the lineage were invited to drink. Produce which still remained up-to the next harvest season was taken out of the granaries and stored on top of the new harvest to be utilized before new produce was consumed. Sufficient quantities of grain were also preserved for sowing during the next season. Produce from the family head's garden was stored in his own granaries. This was exchanged for livestock. Some of it was distributed to his wives in case of shortage in their households. That excess agricultural produce was exchanged for livestock and other products meant that it had both a use-value and an exchange value, and was therefore a commodity (Mambai FGD, Muchanga, 1998).

The Maragoli exchange of commodities within themselves and with their neighbours developed as a result of the peoples' interdependence. The Maragoli engaged in trade long before 1895 and had well-established internal and external exchange of mostly foodstuffs. Due to ecological differences within the region, individuals and groups of people were not able to produce all they wanted. This inter-regional trade was nonetheless irregular and was significant during famines or other ecological disasters. At other times, exchange took place because they produced a surplus.

Trade was organized on the basis of barter. It was mostly carried out in homes, and in periodic market places which were situated along the borders with the Luo and the other Luhya groups key among them being the Wanga and Abanyore. The Maragoli-Wanga relation was mostly strengthened in the 1900 due to the Wanga active involvement in trade links especially after the completion of the Kenya Uganda railway (Ndege, 1987). After the value of trade had been realized, elders from Maragoli met those from the neighbouring clans and agreed through ritual to observe peace in the market place. Market places became highly respected. They were mostly operational during famines and other seasons of demand (Wagner, 1956). Compared with the men, women participated in both internal and external trade by the mere fact that they were more involved in agricultural activities (Musalia, 2010). Women high frequency in trade compared to men is also explained by the fact that it was a taboo to molest them even during war, meaning the women trading activities would continue smoothly even during war without disruptions. Gender was important in establishing links, which were trans-ethnic among the Maragoli and their neighbours including the Wanga and Luo. Though internal trade was more frequent, extensive and involved and affected larger populations, the Maragoli also traded with their neighbours (Mambai FGD). Before the late 19th century therefore, Maragoli men just like most of other Kenyan societies had participated in trade merely as facilitators and not actual traders because of traditions. Presley asserts that among the Agikuyu, men could wait for women's trade caravans at specific points to welcome them and help to carry the trade

goods to the last leg of the journey (Presley, 1986). The contact with the Wanga had made the Maragoli participate in the caravan trade as foodstuff suppliers. The Western Kenya cultivation including the Maragoli one may have expanded as early as the 1860s in response to the demands of the caravan traders. From 1860s, with the penetration of the Swahili-Arabs caravans, the Maragoli had become part of the frequent suppliers to these caravans. By 1880s, the European-led caravans started to expand to the interior later reaching Maragoli land (Ndege, 1987).

The last one and half decades of the nineteenth century witnessed transformation in the social structure of the caravan trade. This transformation was a result of several factors. In the first instance, there was increasing conquest of the Maragoli by the British. This caused a lot of insecurity since more people especially girls were kidnapped. Second, there were natural disasters and epidemics that hit the region in the 1890s that only helped to weaken them against the adversaries (Amisi, 2021). Despite these setbacks, the caravan trade was becoming more profitable during the same period. As a result of insecurity, the number of women in trade began to decline. Consequently, women were side-lined from the caravan trade as especially the young men took up the role of porters. By the beginning of the 20th century therefore, Maragoli women had been pushed to the production sphere with constant restrain from engaging in trade. It is important to understand who controlled agricultural surplus in order to shed light on gender relations of food production. It is argued here that the amount of control over the surplus either encouraged or discouraged women from producing a surplus. Some authors have argued that pre-colonial Kenyan women producers had complete control over the types of crops they planted, how they produced them, and the products of their labour (Nasimiyu, 1985). F.M Muchoki (1988) while writing on pre-colonial times argues that the Kikuyu men took no interest in harvested crops and it was women who decided what was to be consumed at home and what to give out either to relatives or those in need.

Women also proclaimed their position on whether any exchange was possible after ensuring there was enough food for the families. Fisher while writing on the Kikuyu states that men were not even allowed to peep into women's granaries. She maintains that once land was allocated to a woman, she was free to decide what to grow on it (Fisher, 1994). While the decision of crop choice and the subsequent tending of it were left to woman, the appropriation of the profits from surplus remained a site of struggle (Musalia, 2010). This was also the case among the Maragoli. This was because Maragoli women too remained the principal custodians of the homesteads food stores hence better placed to know the exact quantities that would last up to the next harvest before disposing the excess.

The rights of women to dispose of the surplus and control the profits constituted, therefore, a critical element in pre-colonial power relations. One of the informants in her eighties indicated that though women traded, the husbands had the right to make use of those proceeds (Kamasi, O.I, 2023). Discussing the proceeds of trade, Presley asserts that on arrival from her journey, a woman handed over the trade goods to her husband or the eldest son if she was a widow (Presley, 1986).Though the goods belonged to her, she was acknowledging the authority of the husband over her more than the capitalist interpretation of oppression and inferiority. This ritual of handing over the goods can well be explained within the confines of patriarchal system, which governed the Maragoli social relations. Women also traded foodstuffs, which they produced alongside items they made from the local industries. The engagement in trade was not to make huge profits but to build up subsistence strength, which was the motivating factor. Trade emerged in Maragoli as an alternative way of survival following famines. This was mostly when the rains failed because the available food was insufficient to feed the growing population. This led to growth of markets which were known as key exchange and interaction points.

Conclusion

This research article has established that the pre-colonial Maragoli society greatly valued gender roles in food production. Through these differentiated but complementary gender roles, the pre-colonial Maragoli society adequately addressed food security issues. These gender roles, though had a patriarchal bias, ensured that both men and women contributed to the food production cycle. Hunting for example was a male dominated practice but with women helping to cook and serve the hunt proceeds. Through oral interviews and secondary sources, this article, has been able to present its data in a historical narrative format. The main findings are that the pre-colonial Maragoli had a sound gendered approach in its food production endeavours that ensured food security. From these findings, it recommends that more particularized gendered studies on food production should be carried out to help unravel the food security puzzle especially in the pre-colonial era to act as a beginning point into the analysis of the colonial and post-independence food production potentials and challenges.

Reference

Ambler, C. 1988. *Famine and Hunger in Rural East Africa: Analysis and Intervention*. USA: University Microfilms International.

Fisher, J. 1954. *The Anatomy of Kikuyu Domesticity and Husbandry*. Nairobi and London; Department of Technical Cooperation.

Gathogo, J. 2007a. "The Relevance and Influence of African Religion in post-apartheid South Africa and Beyond–Part 1." *Churchman*, 121(2), pp.163-174.

Gathogo, J. 2007b. "The Relevance and Influence of African Religion in post-apartheid South Africa and Beyond, Part 2." *Churchman* 121(3), pp.249-256.

Gathogo, J. 2008. "Some Expressions of African Hospitality Today," *Scriptura* 99(2008), pp.275-287.

Gunter, W. 1956. *The Bantu of Western Kenya*. 2 vols. in 1. London: Oxford University Press.

Hay, M. J., and Stichter, S. eds. 1995. *African women South of the Sahara*. Harlow, Essex: Longman

Mies, M. 2014. *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: Women in the international division of labour*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Muchanga, K. L. 1998. "Impact of economic activities on the ecology of Isukha and Idakho areas of Western Kenya c. 1850-1945." Unpublished MA thesis, Kenyatta University.

Muchoki, C.H.K., 1988. "Remotely sensed relationships between wooded patch habitats and agricultural landscape type: A basis for ecological planning, in Landscape Ecology and Management". pp. 85-94. In: Moss, M. R. (Ed). *Landscape Ecology and Management*. Polyscience Publications Inc., Montreal, Canada.

Muhandale, A. A. 2021. "Patterns of Land Use Among the Maragoli Of Sabatia Constituency, 1900- 2010." Unpublished MA Thesis, Kenyatta University.

Mwikali, W., Makana, N., and Tanui, P. 2021. "From Cattle Herders to Cash Earners: The Emergence of a Migrant Wage Labour Class and Its Impact on Livestock Economy among the Akamba of Machakos, Kenya, 1895-1963." *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research*, 9(2), pp.1-25.

Nasimiyu, R. 1985. "Women in the colonial economy of Bungoma: Role of women in agriculture, 1902–1960." *Journal of Eastern African Research & Development*, 15(1), pp. 56-73.

Ndege, P. O. 1987. "Economic change in Kasipul and Kabondo, 1800-1962." Unpublished MA Thesis: University of Nairobi.

Nyakwaka, D. A. 2013. "Gender and political transformation in Kenya: a case study of women in Luoland, 1895-2002". Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Egerton University.

Reeves, H., & Baden, S. 2000. Gender and development: Concepts and definitions. Report prepared for the Department for International Development (DFID) for its gender mainstreaming intranet resource, Institute of Development Studies, BRIDGE report Number 55, Brighton.

Omwoyo, S. 2008. "Assessing the impact of coffee production on Abagusii women in western Kenya: A historical analysis (1900-1963)", pp.156-167. In C. W. Kitetu (Ed.), *Gender, Science and Technology: Perspectives from Africa*. Senegal. African Books Collective.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

Chavakali Men and Women Farmers FGD at Walodeya Primary School, on 10th October, 2023.

Maragoli Women Farmers' FGD at Wu Mulalu Shopping Centre, on 3rd October, 2023.

Mambai Women FGD at Mambai Primary School Assembly Grounds on 30th September 2023.

Acknowledgement:
The authors acknowledge the study participants who provided valuable data documented in this article. Further, they appreciate the valuable and swift inputs from article reviewers and the editorial team for successful publication of this article.

Ethical pledge:
The researchers confirm that the all data collected was responsibly handled and accurately documented without manipulation of any kind or bias.

Competing interest:
The authors affirm that this research was conducted without impartially competing interests of any kind financially, professionally and personally that may have influenced the outcome of biased results or interpretation.

Author's contribution:
The researchers are the sole authors of this article.

Disclaimer:
The views expressed in this research article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agencies of the authors or the journal itself.

Ethical consideration:
Ethical guidelines relating to respect, honesty, anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were observed. The proposal was approved by Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology Directorate of Post Graduate Studies and the research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI).