

Incorporation into the Market Economy and Food Security among the Gusii: Paradise Lost or Paradise Gained?

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Abstract

This article looks at the Gusii's movement into the market economy and its impact on the region's food security. The primary aim is to capture shifts in the Gusii's food security position vis-à-vis incorporation into the market economy and in particular, the weakening of cultivation as a source of food, and the challenges that surround markets as an emerging alternative. The overall observation is that once the Gusii entered commodity markets, and the more such links were established, their food needs, until then secured largely through cultivating land, faced new challenges. The discussion is based on data from the national archives, district agricultural records, oral narratives and empirical literature.

[Key Words: Gusii; Food Security; Incorporation; Market Economy]

Introduction

This article is based on the practical observation that a high potential rural setting that was once food secure is now characterized by regular shortages. Some of the complexities surrounding this issue arise from observations that food insecurity exists in spite of great strides in agricultural innovation and that not all people can access the food that is available. Among the Gusii generally, it is no longer uncommon to find households going hungry not long after the harvest period. The question therefore is, how has this situation developed?

Some modernization theories argue that food insecurity results from a lack of sufficient supplies among the food needy, a condition that they attribute to a refusal to embrace commercial values, which are assumed to generate efficiency in resource mobilization (Pingali & Rosegrant 1995; Braun et al 1993). Proponents of this school recommend, among other things, the commercialization of the factors of production and putting the 'right' policies in place. Others would argue that commodity relations arising from the commercialization of the factors of production engender hunger, and this continues to be perpetuated by imbalances in terms of trade, a skewed

distribution of the world's resources, and neo-liberal policies (Raikes 1988; Mackintosh 1990). A third position is the argument that food insecurity results from a failure of entitlements, that is, the right to obtain sufficient amounts of the food that is available. Largely emanating from the work of Amartya Sen, this proposition argues that people go hungry because of a breakdown in the relations governing their access to food, following a shift in exchange mappings, or a loss of possessions (Sen 1981).

This discussion aims to put the above issues in a historical perspective. Several interventions, transitions and transformations that took place among the Gusii are traced to the points at which they started impacting on food security. The article focuses on how the Gusii have interacted with change, how they perceived it and how they involved themselves in these processes, and how these have come to impact on their food security position.

Food Production as a Way of Life

In the days before colonial rule, the way of life of the Gusii centred on food production. Two major enterprises governed land use: staples and cattle (Uchendu & Anthony 1975, p.27). Cattle and goats were a means of accumulating wealth and their ownership brought great prestige (Vine & Vine 1966, p.9). However, the importance of cattle among the Gusii has diminished over the years. Initially, this was brought about by a reduction in numbers as a result of epidemics, together with government restrictions on stocks and the 1912 abolition of *gesarate* - the Gusii cattle camps. In later years, the reduction in livestock was compounded by a shortage of grazing lands and labour. The latter came about when most of the young men who used to herd livestock increasingly moved out of the area to seek employment on European plantations and in urban centres. As a result, women started milking cows, a task that they had never engaged in before (Vine & Vine 1966, p.10).

Generally, a distinction was made between arable lands and communal grazing areas. Rights to land were protected and acknowledged by all in the community through utilization, and questions of ownership hardly ever arose in practice. The rule, as enforced by lineage elders, was to make idle land available to anyone who needed it. Independent living for young adult men started with inheriting a piece of land from their father. The timing of when

one could inherit land was dependent on marriage, a sign of having fully entered adulthood. Thus, the land became a source of livelihood and the basis of an individual's boundaries and authority. To provide for oneself and one's dependants was a basic responsibility. Similarly, women gained access to land and esteem through marriage (Field Interviews, 1995 & 1997).

While this way of life was never static, contacts with the 'external' world facilitated a more rapid change in Gusii agriculture and general livelihoods. But, as we will see below, production for subsistence continued to co-exist with growing crops for the market, and movement into off-farm employment has not reduced the role of cultivation as a source of food. If anything, off-farm incomes appear to have been used to enhance people's opportunities in terms of general lifestyle. However, incorporation brought with it new challenges, some of which directly influenced cropping. However, instead of the marginalization that is implied in commoditization literature (cf. Raikes 1988; Sobhan 1990), incorporation sometimes results in reversed fortunes. Even then, the process of incorporation does not move in the direction predicted by modernization theories (cf. Seavoy 1989; Braun et al 1993; Green & Faber 1994). Instead, while markets may offer expanded choices, they can also make attaining food security a more distant hope.

Gaining Access to Land

Among the Gusii, land as described above, was used both for the cultivation of crops and for grazing livestock. Grazing took place on communal grazing lands. Arable land was divided into three categories. One type was the land on which the family homestead stood and where a wife and her children carried out subsistence farming (*egeticha*). The second type consisted of land where the head of the family cultivated crops for his private use (*emonga*). This crop's harvest often served as security in case of a food shortage. The last type (*endemero*) was made up of land that was brought under cultivation by cutting down bush. Several members of the clan cultivated the land on an individual and equal share basis. These 'dispersed' pieces of land later disappeared due to the country's land consolidation policy (Kenya 1965). Some of the ones that survived this policy ceased to exist when the pieces were permanently allocated, to serve as homesteads, for some of the young adult sons that were ready for marriage. This resulted in some close kin having to live far apart. For

the sons who had to relocate, this geographical distance resulted in the need for new networks and alliances, especially for purposes of meeting their food needs.

Customarily, land tenure was based on the principle that every male has heritable rights over arable lands, while grazing sites and forests are shared with kinsmen. When people wanted to expand their acreage, they organised themselves into a group in order to clear thick bush and to till the land. This land was then shared out equally among group members. Kinship remained the chief source of legitimate access to land, and although there were individuals who were relatively wealthier than others, this was not perceived of in terms of the amount of land owned. Wealth, esteem and influence stemmed from having a large herd of cattle, several wives and many offspring (Uchendu & Anthony 1975, p.26). This leads us to ask the question when land size began to vary.

Oral narratives explain that from olden days, people never had uniform amounts of land, in spite of the potential for 'unlimited access'. Once a person occupied a piece of land, he took up as much as he thought necessary and asked his relations to come and live alongside him so that together they could defend themselves from wild animals. Those who had a larger labour force were able to put more land under cultivation, and, over time, they acquired larger holdings. The colonial administration was later to use these 'demarcations' to draw boundaries.

Communal land sites increased after European occupation, as people moved elsewhere, especially following raids by the colonial forces, notably in 1905, 1908 and 1914 (Gethin 1953; Maxon 1971; 1981). Communal land, however, began to disappear around 1928 and by 1935, when *ebisarate* (cattle camps) were finally eliminated by the colonial administration, this communal grazing land became easily appropriated by the administration and its officers.

Therefore, land started acquiring a new meaning as early as 1939. This was about the same period that maize cultivation for sale was at its peak, and several other crops were already being grown for the market. By 1960, the Gusii had started selling and buying land. Ownership changed hands in the presence of clan elders and since there were no title deeds, transactions were

affirmed through effective occupation. These sales were mainly motivated by a desire for ready cash. This need for cash income has continued to be the main reason why people sell their land. While some of those who sold land during their youth needed to raise bride price, these needs have now expanded to include paying for children's education, health care or even purchasing food. The latter suggests some level of desperation. Selling a 'renewable resource' to invest in a 'consumable one' reduces the possibilities for the future.

Labour Organisation

In customary Gusii society, division of labour was based on age and sex, and the family was the main source of labour. Male adults were the heads of their families. They generally managed the homes and performed non-routine tasks such as clearing the bush for cultivation, fencing around the homes, building houses, granaries and cattle enclosures (*boma*), and defending the community against external aggression. On the other hand, women performed almost all the routine agricultural and domestic duties. These included seed selection, hoeing, sowing, weeding and harvesting. They also undertook all household activities such as collecting firewood, fetching water, cooking, maintaining the houses, grinding finger millet and raising the children. Young girls helped their mothers with duties around the home and in the fields.

According to Uchendu & Anthony, the older men had the highest prestige. They discussed cattle matters and settled local and domestic disputes. They also supervised activities in cattle camps (*ebisarate*) and advised the young men in these camps on defence and general warfare. While still living in cattle camps, the young men herded cattle and supplied milk to their families whenever some of the cows calved while in *gesarate* (singular for *ebisarate*). They also took part in hunting and trapping wild animals. Uninitiated boys looked after sheep and goats around the homestead and also ran errands for older boys and men (Uchendu & Anthony 1975; Kenya, 1986; p.37-38).

Although having many daughters enabled households to produce more food, this could also have disadvantages as expressed in the saying that *mwanyabaiseke kerandi getakwoma botakana botagosira* which means that whereas many daughters brought in wealth (paid in the form of cattle), the home had no one to clear (and defend) the fields as this was the work of young

men. Expansion farther afield, a source of increased wealth, depended on a household's ability to clear new ground. Paradoxically, the need for more land and subsequent retention depended on a family's ability to cultivate land in its possession, a job that was largely performed by women and young girls.

Labour groups were common among the Gusii. These were mainly utilized during peak periods such as land preparation and harvesting. These groups were differentiated into *egesangio*, *risaga* and *ekeombe* (Kenya 1986, p.39; Field Interviews, 1995 & 1997). In both organized and *ad hoc* labour groups, input was measured by the number of hours invested and these were equal and compulsory for each person. Whenever someone was indisposed, he/she was required to send a replacement. Hence, as soon as one decided to participate, one committed oneself to group rules and regulations that governed performing these tasks.

Food Production Calendar

Among the Gusii, agriculture was a way of life. The annual calendar began and ended with the starting and completion of farm activities, respectively. Seasons were named according to the agricultural cycle, and celebrations and feasts centred on food harvests. Finger millet was the staple crop, and this was planted throughout the fields. Close to the home, farmers planted vegetables, and within the homestead, they grew maize and other supplementary crops. Each of the twelve months of the year signified a certain stage of the food production cycle.

In January (*monungu n'barema*) fields were cleared and land preparation began. These activities continued into the months of February (*eng'atiato*) and the dry spell of March (*egetamo*) when twigs were removed or trimmed. In April (*rigwata*) finger millet was sown using the broadcast method. The current pattern of planting in March or earlier is an adoption of the highland agricultural calendar. This suggests that, contrary to arguments in the literature that depict the peasant farmer as one that never adopted and adapted, farming practices among the Gusii were never static. There has been a movement towards a different cropping calendar, necessitated by changing circumstances, mainly access to land and labour. But, there is also information

to show that these changes are the result of some external forces (Omosa 1998, p.11).

The month of June (*ebwagi*) was, and continues to be as the Gusii name implies, a period of scarcity. Households that had not stored well or those that had harvested less than enough were faced with shortages. In oral narratives, such households are depicted as belonging to the lazy and poor members of society. Poverty was perceived in terms of human resources, and production was almost always a function of labour input. The month of July (*engoromoni*) was characterized by *ogosuma*, seeking food aid from family/relatives (cf. Vine & Vine 1966, p.13).

In August (*riete*) the men started making new granaries and old ones were repaired and cleaned up in preparation for the new harvest. Harvesting began in August and continued into the month of September (*eburiati ya kebaki*) when sorghum was trimmed to produce a second flowering. October (*egesunte gia chache*) through December (*esagati*) was a period of rest, a time for festivity that culminated in thanks-giving to *engoro*, portrayed in oral narratives as the supernatural. The *ribina* dance marked the end of year and the beginning of a new cycle.

Food Harvest and Storage

Food production among the Gusii was, until the 1930s, synonymous with the cultivation of finger millet (*obori*). The failure of this crop meant hunger and surplus meant prosperity and colourful entertainment during rituals and festivals. In retrospect, the Gusii continue to argue that although demanding in terms of labour, finger millet would be preferable to maize or any other crop. It stored well, it was widely used in beer brewing, and commanded a premium price in exchange for other commodities from the neighbouring Luo community and even amongst the Gusii (Uchendu & Anthony 1975, p.28-29).

Variations in quantities of food harvested resulted from the size of the workforce. Households that had a large number of adult children to clear fields, plough and weed were always ahead of the others. Much of this performance depended on the organizing skills of the married women. For this reason, most men sought to marry hard working girls, and polygamy continued to be common for practical reasons.

Having many daughters had additional benefits. Upon harvest, daughters and young boys stored their finger millet with their mothers, while older boys and adult men (husbands) stored theirs separately (*emonga*). Once the older boys and adult men accumulated enough grain, they exchanged this for goats, and this marked the beginning of their accumulation (*okoniba*). The food stocks belonging to the head of the household were not accessible to his wife (wives), except in cases of severe shortage. Men with a lot of finger millet in their granaries could use it to pay the bride price for a wife from a family with food shortages. Whenever there was a bumper harvest, the food was stored until the next harvest when this surplus was exchanged for livestock, primarily goats. Therefore, even after a bumper harvest, people continued to cultivate finger millet in the following year. They always worked towards increasing yields, in case of bad months ahead, and households only felt secure when they had food that could last them in excess of one year (Field Interviews, August 1996). After the harvest, finger millet was stored in granaries. After threshing (*ok'ora*), the grain was stored in *emenyoncho* (conical containers), *chiny'ongo* (clay pots) and *ebitera* (earth holes).

While women were directly in-charge of food storage, production was a communal responsibility. Each member of the household participated in this process, either in clearing fields, planting, harvesting or bringing additional land under cultivation. However, how long a food harvest lasted depended on the skills of a wife. Women were supposed to undertake good storage (*gokunga*), while men were expected to accumulate (*gosacha*). The argument therefore that food production has been left in the hands of women is not culturally rooted. In Gusii tradition, men went out in search of food as hunters, and this food was brought home and left in the custody of the wife (wives). Similarly, men cleared fields, expanded the frontiers and defended the community's land against external aggression, thus creating the opportunity for women to grow more food. In essence, therefore, men provided the resources and women utilized them in order to feed their families. But, there is underlying evidence that while women procured and received for purposes of distribution to the family, men accumulated.

Incorporation into the Market Economy

The Gusii were the last of the surrounding ethnic groups to be brought under British rule. Maxon explains this delay as resulting from the fact that before 1902, Gusiiland was considered too far in the interior for British interests, which mainly centred on keeping the supply lines to Uganda open. A clan dispute and raids on the Luo, by then under British rule, triggered the arrival of the British in Gusiiland. Oral narratives report that in 1905, Ombati from the Bogusero clan approached the British in Kisumu, seeking protection against the Bogetutu, a rival clan. At the same time, a patrol was sent to Gusiiland to protect the Luo from raids by the Gusii. This patrol entered Gusiiland in September 1905 and forcibly collected cattle as fines. While departing, the patrol was attacked. This offensive was made worse by the presence of Ombati, Bogetutu's enemy, who was now playing the role of interpreter to the British (Maxon 1969, p.350; Field Interviews, 1995 & 1997).

In 1907, the first white men, Northcote and Hemsted, arrived in Gusiiland. They identified a site for their base and supervised the construction of an administrative headquarter, the Kisii Station, which was later to become Kisii Town. The highland climate and the fertile soils of the region favoured this decision. The residence of these colonial administrators in Gusiiland set in motion the incorporation of the region, both administratively and economically. The Gusii soon selected their own chiefs and headmen, who began collecting taxes and demanded that the people were to bring all criminal and civil cases before the administration.

Gusii resistance heightened when the British administration started demanding taxes. In addition to the poll tax that was paid by every adult male, the people were also expected to pay another three rupees as hut tax, for every house owned (Rodwell 1998). Gusii men were therefore forced to sell their cattle to raise the money for paying these taxes. As a result, many Swahili traders were drawn to the district in search of livestock for re-sale (Maxon 1969, p.353). These developments culminated in the 1908 uprising in Gusiiland. The spearing of Northcote by Otenyo in an attempt to stop the administration from driving away Gusii cattle precipitated this revolt. Although the Bogetutu people put up a spirited attack; Northcote had a better-armed force (Field Interviews, 1995 & 1997; Maxon 1969, p.353).

Maxon writes that the Gusii remained hostile to the British administration and force continued to be applied. This was mainly directed towards the large amounts of food that were required to feed the numerous porters and police engaged in the construction and surveillance of the Kisii Station. The food needs of the British administration and their work force depended so much on supplies from the Gusii that when one headman failed to bring in the required amounts, he was locked up until all the food and firewood were supplied (Maxon 1969, p.352). However, in spite of its potential, the physical infrastructure in Kisii remained poor and other support services were equally lacking (Kenya, Agricultural Safari Report 1943). Therefore, Maxon has argued that the lack of expert advice and 'guidance' in agriculture and veterinary matters continued to stifle agricultural expansion. Consequently, while attempting to change what the Gusii were already knowledgeable in, the colonial administration did not help the people to improve their agriculture.

However, the depression of the 1920s in Europe forced many settler farmers out of business, and the colonial administration was compelled to look to the then 'African Reserves' for food and revenue. A staff of 'fully trained' personnel was posted to the area, and seed farms were set up in which high yielding and better quality varieties were tested and distributed. Based on these observations, Maxon argues that the early 1930s marked a turning point for the economy of Gusiiland when partly as a result of the depression, the colonial administration embarked upon a much more 'positive' program of economic development. This manifested itself in efforts to increase production and the introduction of coffee on African farms (Maxon 1971, p.187). Tea and pyrethrum were introduced in 1954 and 1960, respectively.

But, while the Gusii region may have been a grain basket and this made the people prosperous, this success story flows from a much more complex scenario. For example, the outbreak of the Second World War saw the return of many Gusii youth from the Kericho Tea Estates, for fear of being forcibly conscripted. Secondly, a Maize Control Board was established to enforce and regulate marketing, and the compulsory sale of cattle and forced labour for civil purposes was instituted, processes that further interfered with agricultural production. The return of the Gusii youth from the Kericho Tea Estates created a displaced group as they found themselves without an established occupation. This is mainly because by this time, cattle camps were already outlawed and

de-stocking had become policy. Although the presence of these youths contributed to increased production, their return marked the beginning of a form of underemployment, particularly when marketing fell under severe restrictions. For example, in April 1931, all export and sale of foodstuffs was prohibited except by permit, and as a result, local food prices remained low for most of that year (Field Interviews, 1995 & 1997; Maxon 1971, p.171; Kenya 1931a). As we will see later on, in spite of these low prices, restrictions in the movement of maize exacerbated the adverse effects that followed the 1931 locust invasion, notably in the South Mugirango, Bonchari and Bogusero areas of Gusiiland.

Evidently, food production in Kisii during the incorporation period can be divided into three phases. The first is the subsistence set-up where, in the absence of 'natural' challenges, food output depended on labour and land, both of which were readily available. The second is the entry into the commodity market and the introduction of maize as an export crop, which stimulated production and at the same time altered the food patterns of the Gusii. Although maize cropping was favoured by the colonial administration, the food needs of the Gusii were nevertheless not severely threatened during this second phase. By the end of the war period, the Gusii were still food secure and crop diversification and trade had come to cushion them against the natural disasters that had characterized their food security in phase one. But, the introduction of cash crops, mainly coffee (but also tea), marked a major turning point in their food security. During this third phase, food production 'returned' to subsistence status, but this time around, the Gusii also had begun to engage in simultaneous cash cropping. The District's food situation is now largely dependent on these choices, the most significant being the movement towards commodity production. Therefore, the struggle has been to produce for subsistence and for the market at the same time.

Establishment of Maize Farming

Prior to the colonial period, maize was a secondary grain among the Gusii, grown only as a backyard crop (*egeticha*), mainly for roasting. This maize type was of a black and white mix locally known as *emekebaru*. Seed for this maize was generated as follows: after the harvest, some of the maize was 'roasted' (for purposes of drying) and then hung in the kitchen (*isang'ina*)

where it became gradually covered with soot (*omw'are*), and this provided the necessary protection until the next planting.

According to oral narratives, the change-over from the traditional mixed colour maize to the pure white seed resulted from a new maize seed that was brought from Uganda by some Maragoli (Luhya) speaking people who had migrated to the area. The local people referred to this new seed as *rigegu*, a direct translation for molar teeth (*amagegu*). In 1950 some members of the community decided to plant *rigegu* seed, while others stuck to *emekebaru* seed. However, the white maize came out blackened due to cross-pollination. Soon, the entire area decided to shift to planting *rigegu* seed and this almost marked the end of *emekebaru* maize seed in the area. *Rigegu* seed was later replaced by hybrid forms. However, *emekebaru* has persisted because '*omonto bwanchete nyama ya gokwa tagotiga*', that is, old habits die hard (Field Interviews, 1996; Bryceson et al 1997, p.2).

Other accounts, however, state that the *rigegu* seed was introduced in 1918 by the British (*Abasongo*). At that time, a few people took up the new seed, but they only grew it along the borders of their finger millet fields (*chimbebe*) and maize served merely as a snack food. This was largely because in the absence of maize milling techniques, the people could not produce maize flour for use in their staple diet, *ugali*. The change-over from finger millet to maize flour was stimulated by the introduction of the first water-powered flour mill (*eregaregu*) in the area, in 1919, which mainly milled maize for the colonial government. The flour was used in 'government' institutions to feed the large troops of porters and the police force. Field interviews also suggest that most other people that were in the employment of the colonial administration, such as office clerks, received maize flour as official ration. When going on annual leave, they took this maize flour to their rural homes, and it was from these employees that the Gusii in the 'reserve' learnt that maize too could make *ugali*. Once maize became widespread and *posho* mills were available, maize flour became more convenient to obtain than finger millet flour. In 1936, a second flour mill was set up, and the consumption of *ugali* made from maize flour increased, to the detriment of finger millet. Maize milling continues to be one of the most profitable rural enterprises in several parts of Gusiiland. Although maize did not overtake finger millet in acreage until around 1954, there was a deliberate move to promote maize cultivation, and to increase its

availability on the market. Some of the methods used included price incentives, transportation subsidies, inducing a desire for factory-made farm inputs and other household necessities, and coercive ones such as the need for cash income with which to pay poll and hut taxes. Increasingly, the importance of finger millet receded, and while the crop is still perceived as the main staple food of the Gusii, most farmers are now of the opinion that finger millet no longer does as well and is also too demanding in terms of labour input. There is therefore a general fear that finger millet will soon become extinct because the knowledge and skill pertaining to its production is no longer being passed on from one generation to another.

Introduction of Cash Crop Farming

Kisii, Embu and Meru were the only Districts in Kenya where Africans were permitted by the colonial government to grow cash crops that were otherwise the privilege of European settlers (Maxon 1981, p.120). The selection of these three districts was based on the observation that these areas were isolated and therefore badly needed high value cash crops (Heyer 1974). The most practical reason, however, seems to be that the soil potential in the three districts was good, and since each one of them was far from European farms, they did not constitute any serious competition to settler farming. The Gusii's enthusiasm to grow coffee is reflected in a report from the District Agricultural Officer (DAO) to the colonial administration. The report points out that it was 'no longer a question of persuading people to plant, but one of selecting the most suitable applicants and allowing them to plant small areas only' (Kenya 1945). A total of 78 hectares were under coffee in 1933, and by 1946, farmers in Kisii had more than doubled the area under coffee.

The introduction of coffee farming marked the beginning of a permanent policy switch from growing food crops for the market to producing raw material for the industry. In Kisii, this became more pronounced when World War II ended, bringing to a halt the need for food exports. With a new era in Europe, import needs shifted to raw materials. However, the entry of the Gusii into cash crop farming only sustained their access to farm incomes, a process that had begun with the introduction of maize as a market crop. As a result of this change in policy, and for many years thereafter, every Gusii farmer aspired to plant coffee, and those who had some coffee shrubs prior to the

1980s were relatively prosperous. In addition, coffee farming was a gateway to other benefits, such as membership in co-operative societies, which was limited to cash croppers, and it carried such benefits as a credit line and favourable attitudes from extension workers. By independence in 1963, there were over 29,000 coffee growers in Kisii, having risen from a modest 196 growers in 1941. This enthusiasm continued to characterize land use patterns in the area, with every farmer aspiring to have at least some land under coffee.

The shift to conventional cash crops, mainly coffee and tea, was expected to enhance the district's food security. According to the agricultural policy of the colonial administration and that of current thinking, farmers should engage in the cultivation of export crops where they can use their incomes to purchase their own food on the market. It is however questionable how far this is really practicable given that the world market prices for major commodities have progressively dropped. In Kisii, the fall in coffee prices has put those who invested in the crop in a predicament. Returns are now low, and given the multiplicity of household needs, these cash incomes no longer cover general subsistence. At the same time, cash cropping continues to compete for the same resources as food production. And, with rapidly reducing plot sizes, it is impossible to diversify cropping with the hope of broadening the scope for both subsistence and cash incomes.

Penetration of Markets

Although markets are not new to the Gusii, their role in the people's food security has changed over the years. The market has been transformed from a place to obtain complementary supplies to a major source of food. However, the most drastic change is probably the amount of control that people have over markets. In the barter era, markets were just an optional source of food, they provided an alternative, but this remained to a large extent just an option. In the colonial period, markets were, for the major part, an extension of colonial rule. In more recent times, a view that has aptly been captured by Skinner, markets have become a mixed blessing, a paradox in rural life (Skinner 1968, p.270).

Measures to engage the Gusii in markets centred mainly on the introduction of new crops, the export of agricultural produce out of the district and the use of political power to enforce these 'linkages'. During this period, we see a struggle by the Gusii to accommodate and at the same time resist forces of incorporation by ensuring that in times of food shortages, only little was. Nevertheless, interdependence between the agriculturally rich Gusii and their food-deficient Luo neighbours flourished from simple barter to a cash economy.

Exchanging Assets

Oral narratives affirm that the exchange of commodities has existed as long as people can remember. What is new are the unfolding choices regarding the items to be exchanged, the mode of trade, and expansion in trading boundaries. The Gusii traded amongst themselves, with their neighbours and also with outsiders, such as Indian traders and European merchants. Initially, most of the trade with 'outsiders', including those from different Gusii clans, took place at border points. In cases where the Gusii needed to travel far away, only women went to meet their counterparts, sometimes under the escort of a few men (Field Interviews, 1995 & 1997). Women were preferred because it was believed that they were less likely to be molested along the way. Both sides also feared that if men were to be engaged, they would end up spying on the technological skills of the others. Furthermore, there was a concern that the men might engage in 'stealing' girls from other clans and thus take shortcuts into marriage as opposed to working in order to raise the required bride price.

Barter trade was mainly conducted so as to acquire items that one did not have. From the list of things that the Gusii exchanged amongst themselves it is evident that grain was also traded (Table 1). Finger millet was mainly used to acquire farm implements such as hoes and axes. These iron implements were very scarce, partly because they were made by specific people, belonging to a certain lineage (*ororeri*). Those who received grain were not necessarily food insecure. They, too, exchanged this grain for a goat or anything else that they needed. Nevertheless, the fact that food was a medium of exchange does suggest that there were those among the Gusii who actually depended on this trade to meet their consumption needs. It is also apparent that agricultural produce was at that time relatively better remunerated than was to be the case

in the cash economy.

Table 1: Barter trade among the Gusii

A basket (<i>ekee</i>) of finger millet	A hoe (<i>egesire</i>)
A basket of finger millet	A sickle
One bull	A hoe
30 goats	One cow/Bull
Two hens	A small goat
One small basket of finger millet	One knife/Axe
One small cow	One marriage stool

Source: Compiled from Field Interviews, 1995 & 1997; Birundu 1973, p.29

Table 2: Barter trade between the Gusii and the Luo

One calabash of finger millet	Same amount of salt (<i>ebara</i>)
One pot of finger millet	Same size pot (<i>enyongo</i>)
One hoe	One cow
One goat	A small portion of poison
One large basket of finger millet	One shield
One basket of finger millet	Same size basket (<i>egetonga</i>)
One pot of finger millet	Same size pot of sour milk (<i>egechieto</i>)

Source: Compiled from Field Interviews, 1995 & 1997; Birundu 1973, p.29

Besides trading internally, the Gusii also traded with the Luo (Table 2). The Gusii mainly bartered finger millet for Luo pottery, fish and salt. In cases of severe need, the Luo even exchanged their cattle for grain. It is apparent that in both cases, people gave away that which they were best skilled in, while they acquired that which they needed most. Paradoxically, the Luo also gave the Gusii items of weaponry, in spite of the raids that they sometimes carried out against each other.

These trade ties increased in volume to the extent that, when regular markets became established, cattle raids ceased between the two communities (Field Interviews, 1995 & 1997). Much of this trade took place along their common border, although in later years Luo traders were to be seen with donkey loads of lick-salt and pots, walking from place to place in the Gusii region, hawking. Before then, the Gusii and the Luo had traded at border points only. There were no fixed market days, although moonlit seasons were preferred, in case night fell in the course of the journey (Birundu 1973). With time, fixed meeting places developed near the common borders and these were later to become market centres and established towns (Obudho & Waller 1976).

Both oral narratives and existing records do not suggest much trade between the Gusii and their other neighbours, except during severe famines. There are, however, some indications that the Gusii traded with the Bantu-speaking Kuria to the South and the Nilotic-speaking Maasai and Kipsigis to the East. Oral narratives also suggest that Arab traders came to Gusii before Indians, Nubians, Somalis and later the British, although they stayed only briefly. They exchanged bangles and beads for food and ivory. These early visits are corroborated by observations that for a long time, Gusii women commonly wore beads and bangles as part of their cultural ornamentation.

The Colonial Era

The District Annual Reports for the period 1914-1945 show that colonial interest in marketing agricultural produce from the Gusii region increased when the World War I broke out. This was necessitated by the need to feed the British troops and allied forces. This demand expanded with the extension of the railway line to Kisumu, the opening of the Kakamega gold fields and the Tea Estates in Kericho, and to a lesser degree, increasing awareness that some parts of Kenya were experiencing food shortages. While these exports lead to the conclusion that the Gusii benefited immensely from the commercialization of their agricultural production (Kenya 1945), this is exaggerated. The period was also characterized by controls the main aim of which was to make grain available at a minimal cost, while no actual investment was made in the long-term development of Gusiiland. The period in question only concentrated on the extraction of cheap agricultural produce for the urban labour force and the export market.

Maxon actually argues that throughout the war, trade in agricultural produce in Gusii was generally depressed. He explains that during this period the colonial administration spent their time and energy producing men to work as carrier corps, and there were no specially trained agricultural officers assigned to the district. He further argues that there was little market for Gusii grain except among the Luo, and although the conditions of the war period made it worse, the 'position of Gusiiland in relation to potential markets long remained an inhibiting factor to the export of surplus foodstuffs' (Maxon 1971, p.108-9). This position is supported by the fact that Gusiiland was relatively isolated and remote from any large markets. Produce had to be carried to the lake ports by ox cart, and from there it was sent to the railway terminus in Kisumu by boat, a long and expensive route (Gethin 1953, p.3). This difficulty in transporting agricultural produce to outside markets due to poor infrastructure has continued to hold back agricultural development even in post-independence Gusii.

On the other hand, given the volume of exports that left Gusiiland, the lagging behind of the region is best explained by low remuneration. However, unlike the current period, people then had other possibilities and they could therefore choose to keep markets at bay. For example, during the period of 1919-1921, trade reduced due to a slow recovery and poorer prices, an aftermath of the war. By March 1919, three quarters of the Indian shops were forced to close down for lack of supplies. Exports from Gusiiland were limited to *sim-sim* (sesame) and hides. The flow of larger amounts of maize out of the area only resumed in 1922 (Maxon 1971, p.118-119).

Indian Traders

The Indian traders who settled in Gusiiland were both a blessing and a nuisance to the Gusii. These traders had been encouraged to settle in Gusiiland by the colonial administration so as to induce the Gusii to invest in markets. Secondly, their presence was used to keep the Gusii 'out of town' as traders. On the other hand, the Indians provided the Gusii with an outlet for their farm produce. The first Indian traders settled at Karungu, the then Headquarters for Nyanza (Kavirono). Thereafter they moved to Kisii, and by 1914 there were 13 Indian traders with 4 shops. The shops stocked cloth, blankets, hoes, utensils, salt, sugar and tea. These goods were imported into the country by

fellow Indian merchants in Kisumu and brought to Kisii by steamer via Kendu Bay (Rajwani 1971). Initially, these goods were traded for local produce, mainly maize, millet, beans, wheat, *sim-sim* and ghee. Rupees were introduced later.

The Indian shopkeepers used Nubian, Somali, Luo and Gusii agents to take their goods such as beads, copper, hoes and medicines into the interior of Gusiiland for sale. The colonial administration encouraged this and they even allowed Indian traders to accompany 'officers on *safari*' to induce the Gusii to invest more in imported goods. Besides raising revenue, this was also indirectly aimed at making the Gusii desire cash income which would then force them to sell and thereby to reduce their herds, in addition to seeking off-farm wage employment. The colonial administration also used the Indians in Kisii to distribute agricultural seeds and farm implements so as to stimulate the production of products that would earn the administration revenue once exported to other districts in the country or to overseas markets.

Alongside the Indians came European traders. Writing about his own trade expeditions, Gethin describes how he moved finger millet and sorghum flour from Kisii to sell to the Maasai, a 70 kilometre journey that he and his assistants made by donkey (Gethin 1953, p.4). Gethin also traded in livestock and wheat. He explains that he got his wheat from Gusii farmers, which he milled before selling it to Indians and Europeans in Kisii and Kisumu, respectively. The Europeans in Kisumu used this wheat flour for baking bread, but this did not continue for long, because wheat soon disappeared completely from Gusii farms (Gethin 1953, p.7; Kenya 1909).

Seemingly, markets provided a source of cash income for the Gusii, while enabling their neighbours to meet their food needs. And, except in rare instances, the Gusii did not, during this period, depend on markets for their food needs. However, over time, Gusii food needs started rising beyond what they could grow themselves. While the introduction of good farming techniques may have enhanced production, diversification of cropping patterns jeopardised the possibilities that increased cultivation could offer. The movement towards commodity production introduced new demands, which then induced change in the search for food, and because of this, the district's food situation was severely disrupted.

Famine, Hunger and Food Shortages

Famine, hunger and food shortages are all types of food insecurity, whose definitions overlap. Food shortages may lead to hunger which in turn may result in a famine. But, in a practical sense, it is difficult to differentiate between them and thus to draw a line between these processes. In general, famine is a severe food shortage that is assumed to give way to hunger and starvation. It is a societal crisis induced by the dissolution of the accustomed availability of, and access to staple foods on a scale sufficient to cause starvation among a significant number of individuals (cf. Braun *et al* 1993, p.74; Sen 1981, p.39-40; Devereux 1993; de Waal 1993). Hence, famine is a widespread form of food shortage which results in social and economic disorganization and even death. In spite of this, not all famines lead to starvation (de Waal 1990, p.471).

In Gusii oral history, hunger is synonymous with food shortages, and these were perceived to arise from a shortfall in one's harvest. But, there were established mechanisms to enable those faced with hunger or inadequate food supply (*enchara*) to meet their needs in the interim period. By contrast, famine, locally referred to as *egeku* (deadly disaster) was seen as an unavoidable occurrence, which suggests that there were no laid down mechanisms to respond to such a situation. Almost all reported famines were attributed to some natural (supernatural) catastrophe that went beyond people's control. Although most of the famines are said to have lasted for no longer than one year, they had devastating consequences on the lives of the people. These famines were eventful, but they are also reported to have come to an end with the harvest of a new crop. However, while there may be fewer famines now, many people are no less threatened by ordinary food shortages than they may have been by famine in the past.

Gusii oral narratives do not indicate whether there were famines and food shortages prior to colonisation. While it could be easily concluded that hunger set in with the movement towards a market economy, the existence of *ogosuma* (an established food aid practice) and the barter trade in grain suggest that at least some households did face shortfalls, which one might assume they generally countered through precisely these mechanisms. Nevertheless, as we will see below, some of the food shortages went beyond

the capacity of such mechanisms to address appropriately.

An Act of God

Food shortages in Gusii were, prior to the 1930s, attributed to natural disasters, acts of God. Consequently, people did not try to intervene directly, although the people did re-organise themselves so as to adapt to the new realities. They migrated, some gave up children, while others fed on anything that was eatable. The earliest reported famine among the Gusii known as *langi* took place in 1896 (KNFU 1965). This famine, whose name seems to have been borrowed from their Luo neighbours (and in Luo means *to lick with the tongue*), resulted from ravages by locusts. The locusts initially attacked the lakeshores before spreading to the Gusii Highlands. There were numerous deaths from starvation, and a smallpox epidemic at the same time had disastrous effects on a population that was already weakened by hunger. Many migrated out of the area during this period. The *langi* famine ended with the successful harvest of 1897.

Although famines are perceived as blanket disasters, this was not the case in Gusiiland. During the *langi* famine, some people fed on tree barks, while others fed on animal skins, and by implication some must have fed on animal meat. Moreover, the fact that children were exchanged for food suggests that there were those among the Gusii who had more food reserves than others, and those with surplus food made a profit. And, as early as this period, we see a breakdown in the social safety nets. Instead of resorting to other existing food assistance mechanisms, acute scarcity resulted in giving up children in exchange for food (cf. Rahmato 1991, p.185).

In 1914, the Gusii were afflicted by yet another famine, locally referred to as *nyabiage* or *nyamauga*. During this period, which is reported to have been caused by drought, granaries were emptied completely, a rare occurrence and indeed a taboo at the time. People were forced to feed on dead animals and even worse, the bones of these dead animals were ground into flour for consumption, hence the name *nyamauga*. This was closely followed by yet another famine in 1918, known as *kunga*, also caused by a delay in rainfall. Some oral narratives refer to this famine as *enchara ya kengere* or *nyabisagwa*. The latter is drawn from the fact that during this famine people

were forced to eat *ebisagwa*, immature sorghum which they boiled in lick-salt. District Annual Reports for the period argue that no deaths were directly attributed to this famine, although an influenza outbreak claimed over 5,000 lives at the end of that year.

It is interesting that both the 1914 and 1918 famines coincided with the period of war in Europe. The colonial administration was already entrenched in Gusiiland and exports out of the district were happening, intended to feed troops at sea. Therefore, although official records attribute these famines to drought, incorporation played a considerable role. We have already seen that during the period that the Gusii were under colonial rule, grain was taken from them, both for free and in exchange for cash. The end result in either case was that the people had fewer reserves and any reduction in their next harvest became catastrophic.

Besides the penetration of markets, Gusii oral narratives attribute the 1918 famine, also referred to as *enchara ya oino*, to some (false) prophecy. This prophecy, attributed to a local prophetess, implored the Gusii not to cultivate their land. She predicted that this would make the white man leave Gusiiland. Although this never came true, this line of reasoning makes a lot of sense. Given that the large workforce of colonial porters and police depended on the community for food supplies, hunger would have easily driven them out. The only problem is that the prophetess did not comprehend the fact that before this workforce went hungry all the Gusii would have starved to death since the administration had the machinery to demand food, many times for free.

It appears from the various sources available that Gusiiland was one of the 'African Areas' least hard hit by the famine and influenza. Instead, the Gusii to some extent benefited economically during this period as they sold grain to their Luo neighbours who were intensely affected by famine as well (Kenya 1930). However, Maxon argues that the years of World War I brought little benefit to Gusiiland. Noting that large demands were made on the area in terms of human resources, Gusiiland was, like other African areas, generally neglected in terms of infrastructure development and the provision of social services. To make it worse, the last years of the war were marked by the emergence of a new form of resistance to British rule (*Mumboism*) which was mercilessly repressed (Maxon 1971, p.116).

Nevertheless, the Gusii seem to have emerged from this period in control of the situation. Over 75 percent of the *dukas* (cereal shops at the time) closed down as farmers responded to the shortages by not selling grain. And although over 80 percent of the Luo livestock went to the Gusii in exchange for maize, by mid 1918, the Gusii stopped supplying maize for fear that the drought, which had until then been largely limited to Luoland, would spread to their region as well. Consequently, relief maize imported by the colonial administration from South Africa was brought in for sale to famine stricken areas (Kenya 1946). The fact that the Gusii were able to determine when to sell and when not to sell, is indication that at the time food security was perceived as being able to retain adequate food reserves. Markets were therefore meant for surplus produce. It is also apparent that the people were able to foresee food shortages and could refrain from selling what was just an interim surplus.

Some food shortages had more than one explanation. According to the colonial administration, the 1931 famine was the result of excessive rainfall in the months of March to June of the previous year. This situation was exacerbated by increased exportation, the lower than average rainfall of 1929, and the less than abundant harvest of 1928 (Kenya 1930). However, oral narratives attribute the 1931 famine, locally known as *nyangweso*, to a locust invasion following a curse. The story goes that this curse was brought upon the community by a son-in-law who persuaded a man known as Nyasoni to bring *chingige* (locusts) upon the Gusii to avenge the death of his father-in-law, a roadside beggar who had been stoned to death through mob justice. This famine is therefore also referred to as *egeku kia Nyasoni*.

The 1931 *nyangweso* famine is one of the most notorious in Gusii history. A large number of Abagusii people dispersed to three areas: Subaland, Kurialand and Luoland. Alongside this, some families gave away their children in exchange for food from the neighbouring Luo, Suba and Kuria communities. However, some Gusii families managed to remain. They received emergency food aid, mainly Irish potatoes. Additionally, chiefs were directed to force the Gusii to plant sweet potatoes, and village headmen were specifically instructed to ensure that every man put a reasonable amount of land under this crop. Sweet potatoes were recommended because locusts could not destroy them. This marked the beginning of sweet potatoes as a common feature in

Gusiiland but, partly for the same reason, sweet potatoes have remained just an emergency crop, grown only on surplus land, if at all. In 1932, sorghum and cottonseeds were issued and orange seedlings were imported from Zanzibar. A coffee nursery was started and sorghum field trials were expanded for purposes of identifying suitable varieties for the district's conditions. Locusts again invaded Gusiiland in 1939.

While both the District Annual Reports (1931b) and oral narratives agree on the fact that nobody died from the *nyangweso* famine because it was not followed by an epidemic, the two sources differ on the impact of the invasion. Whereas there are stories of massive out-migration, district reports for this period show that the Gusii suffered little and for the most part, they made profit selling to their Luo and Kuria neighbours (Kenya 1931b). This discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that famines and food shortages impact on people in a diversity of ways. While some suffer shortages, others make profits out of increased demand. Among the Gusii, even at the time, households stored variedly and although everybody planted each year, the quantity of harvest and reserves was not uniform.

The *nyangweso* famine was nevertheless intense. In 1931, alone, the Gusii-Abakuria Native Council spent 20,000 rupees on famine relief, while the government of South Nyanza supplied 21,000 bags of maize. The Luo-Abasuba Local Native Council funded the free distribution of maize to those in their locations who had neither the money to pay nor the ability to work for their food (Kenya 1931a). It is again evident that vulnerability to food shortages varied. At the time, ability to work was as good a source of food as having the money to pay for it. The famous *nyangweso* famine lasted for one year. The extermination of the locusts and the good rains of 1932 brought this period to an end.

While these famines and food shortages may have been due to natural causes, vulnerability to them was not. Although the Gusii seem to have benefited from the fact that the neighbouring communities were not as well endowed, some people within the Gusii community also suffered immensely at the same time, so they even turned to hitherto 'food importing' communities for assistance. The cause of these food shortages went beyond the drought to include the level of preparedness. Hence, looking at famine and general crop failure as an act of

God leaves out the human hand, the role of social, political and economic processes. The question then is: why do droughts turn into famines and that some sections of the population suffer more than others?

Man's Own Making

As already noted, for most of the colonial period Gusiiland was a grain basket. Around the mid 1940s, the Gusii region was known for and encouraged to produce staple foods for the market. But, amidst what can be described as abundant production, people also moved into cash cropping, and although food markets became a reality, some of the accompanying changes presented new challenges. Incorporation into the market economy had two parallel influences on the food situation of the Gusii. First, commercial farming competed with subsistence production in terms of resource allocation. And second, production for export widened the scope by bringing in markets as an additional source of food. In both cases, the emerging importance of outside intervention in the food needs of the Gusii became more explicit and although famines as blanket disasters (*egeku*) ceased to exist, 'hunger' became widespread. Hence, *egeku*, which implies 'things closing in for all', was no longer an appropriate term, because the sources of food had since increased.

Therefore, when the Gusii were next confronted with food shortages in 1961, and unlike previous instances when such challenges were left to the supernatural, the people sought intervention. In April, the Secretary-General of the Abagusii Union wrote to the District Agricultural Officer (DAO) requesting technical assistance (Kenya 1966a). And, in May 1961, the Secretary-General again wrote to the District Commissioner (DC) demanding food relief while indicating that the impending food shortages were now real (Kenya 1966b).

In his reply to the above letters, the District Commissioner noted that the government was aware that there was a food shortage in the Gusii highlands, but that he had decided that it was not necessary to send famine relief to the district. Instead, the National Produce and Marketing Board received instructions to send supplies for sale to the Gusii people. This decision was based on the belief that since the district was part of the highlands, it was prosperous enough to purchase food. Vine and Vine arrived at a similar

conclusion by stating that the Gusii's standard of living was higher than that of most people living in 'underdeveloped' areas. The Gusii were better fed, better clothed, and had more purchasing power than most peasant farmers in North Africa, the Middle East and East Asia (Vine & Vine 1966, p.10). This attitude towards Gusiiland as a grain basket has persisted to date, and people living in the area have never been listed among those likely to be food insecure, largely because food security has continued to be equated with agricultural potential. While this may have been the case at one time, the continued perception of Gusiiland as a grain basket ignores the changes that have taken place in the region, rendering adequate food unattainable for many.

What was initially merely a threat, aptly predicted by the Gusii people who then went ahead to seek assistance, turned out to be real. Army worms (*chingeti*) invaded the region and unlike locusts, these destroyed all crops, including sweet potatoes. In spite of this, the Gusii did not receive food aid nor did they ever afterwards. The food situation deteriorated and in his 1961 report to the Provincial Commissioner (PC), the District Commissioner of Kisii described the food situation in Gusiiland as quite bad (Kenya 1966c).

However, the reported invasion by army worms during the 1961 food shortages can only be viewed as a coincidence. This is because for about eight years running since 1954, acreage under maize alone almost quadrupled, while that under millet and sorghum remained significantly high. And although maize output was already undergoing a relative decline during this period, in 1961, a record amount of maize was marketed as compared to both 1960 and 1962 (Omosa 1998, p.91). Why then were the Gusii faced with such a threat that even included requesting that there be food on the market to make purchases possible? This is because on their part, the otherwise food-abundant Gusii found themselves 'suddenly' without reserves after they had sold out in anticipation of a regular harvest. And because the maize market, and indeed the entire agricultural sector at the time, was centrally organised, they needed the co-operation of those who were in charge of marketing to be able to purchase food. With poor physical reserves and nothing on the market, the Gusii food security was in jeopardy, in spite of the money in their hands.

The intervals of food shortages among the Gusii started narrowing after 1961. In 1965, the Gusii faced yet another food shortage. Although the administration, as represented by the District Commissioner, tried to deny the existence of these shortages, this was contradicted in several ways. For example, in his brief, the District Officer (DO) of North Kisii wrote to the effect that the food situation was bad. The government, however, failed to intervene directly. Neither relief food nor supplies for sale were sent to the district, in spite of the fact that the government had imported yellow maize from the United States of America following the countrywide food shortages of 1965 (Kenya 1965). Nevertheless, some of the imported maize still found its way to Gusiiland. A trader in North Mugirango had some of this maize in his shop, and a bag cost around seventy eight shillings, about 56 percent over the farm gate price offered to the Gusii by the then Maize Control Board. It is no wonder then that most of the people continued to find it necessary to grow their own food as the surest way to meet their food needs.

Nevertheless, the 1965 food shortage did not impact uniformly. According to the District Agricultural Officer, these shortages were worse in the lakeshore locations (Luo community). The same officer expressed concern that the Luo were already buying food from the higher locations (Gusiiland), but it was doubtful if they were going to be able to continue 'feeding from the market' until the next harvest. This situation, mainly assessed in terms of crop performance and market prices, deteriorated for the Gusii as well, but levels of intensity varied (cf. Kenya 1965).

These food shortages eased up with the falling of ample rain, and by 1966, the food situation was satisfactory. The West Kenya Marketing Board started receiving deliveries and stocks were again building up. Higher-yielding maize seed was in high demand, and bananas were already being exported out of the district by lorry to Nakuru and Nairobi. However, what had been earlier on rejected by the Gusii in spite of having been recommended by the colonial government was now taking effect: farmers in the pyrethrum growing areas shifted away from food crop cultivation, and this was of much concern to the authorities (Kenya 1965).

In general therefore, when land was still plenty and un-demarcated, the Gusii balanced growing finger millet with maize. At that time, farmers only decided

between selling and not selling. However, the shift to growing non-food crops meant that farmers had now to balance resource use, prior to cultivation. This was complicated by the reduction in demand for maize, finger millet and sorghum and the new interest in conventional cash crops, mainly coffee, tea and pyrethrum, as the only crops that could be traded in world markets. Whereas the proportion of land under tea and coffee combined remains relatively small compared to that under maize, the overall effect is still a challenge to the food needs of the Gusii. This is in terms of resource allocation, mainly land, labour and capital and, subsequent to this, the potential of income earned to serve as a cushion for contingencies.

Life without Growing One's Own Food

Prior to the introduction of cash markets, the Gusii traded their surplus produce on a barter system. This form of exchange was fairly fixed, internally generated and negotiated. On the other hand, cultivation of maize on a large scale was first undertaken in Gusiiland purposely for the export market. Thus, demand was externally generated and so was price, although farmers made every attempt to resist low prices. However, by the end of World War II, the colonial administration was of the opinion that the Gusii highlands needed to convert to a cash economy by engaging in the export of high-value low-bulk crops and the importation of food (Kenya 1946).

Although the Gusii had, by 1945, been engaged in markets for close to half a century, the recommendation that they convert to a cash economy was a reversal of the way they had participated in markets up to that point. Until then, the Gusii were largely engaged in markets through the cultivation of finger millet and maize, both of them food crops, but on a scale that allowed them to sell surpluses. Much as some of the people were also now engaged in the cultivation of coffee, this was undertaken alongside staple food crops. The latter scenario came to dominate the cropping patterns of the Gusii; and the purchase of staple grain continued to be associated with undertaking the undesirable, a sign that things were not going well. In later years, however, increased urbanization introduced a new category of persons and 'feeding from the market' became associated with a 'cosmopolitan lifestyle. This element introduced some 'status' in purchasing staple food, but forced purchasing has remained *ogotonda*, i.e. feeding from the market. As one respondent

recounted, 'those who rely on purchases are like birds of the air' waiting for others to work, only to join in' (Field Interviews, August 1996).

But, from one food shortage to another, more and more households started acquiring some of their staple food on the market. Over time, food shortages changed from a one-off occurrence to a regular pattern that is likely to have become permanent. The Gusii's relationship with markets transformed from an outlet for their farm produce, and therefore a source of cash income, to a source of food. These varying perceptions of the role of markets in the Gusii's food needs continue to influence the way the people define their food security status. The proposition that people in the Gusii region have a potential to obtain their food on the market while they put their land under other uses has remained unattractive to many. At the household level, this proposal rests on several assumptions, among them, that incomes earned will be sufficient (and the food markets will function). However, while there has been some effort to avoid market failure, the more significant consideration has been largely ignored, that is, that markets respond not so much to needs but rather to a pull, namely the consumers' ability to pay (cf. Mackintosh 1990, p.43; Devereux 1993, p.86).

Hence, what challenges face those among the Gusii who have chosen a 'life without growing their own food'? We have already seen that in so doing, they become like 'birds of the air', not because they might not be able to support kin and friend, but because by relying on markets, they double their vulnerability, particularly if they also depend on agricultural incomes for the purchase of staple food. And, as argued by Amartya Sen, the returns from conventional cash crops, and hence their endowment bundle, could fall below what they need to meet their food needs on the market (Sen 1981). Whether in fact there will be food on the market will depend on the 'pull' that such households can generate for traders to respond accordingly. Although the Gusii area is well served with market centres, several parts of the region are impassable for much of the year. Therefore, in addition to a reluctance to engage in the unusual, the recommendation that the Gusii shift away from growing of their own food ignores the practical challenges that this suggestion presents.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the circumstances under which changes in the food security of the Gusii took place, and in particular, the movement towards production for the market. We have discussed some of the factors that influence how the Gusii continue to perceive their food needs, how they define their food security strategies, and why cultivation has continued to take centre stage. We have seen that while food shortages have always existed, they could now be less conspicuous. Hunger has transformed from being the result of some 'natural' and widespread calamity, such as a locust invasion, to being an everyday nightmare for those who are not in a position to obtain food that is otherwise available to others. The question then is: what may have been gained (or lost) in the process of incorporation into markets?

Incorporation dismantled mechanisms that were already in existence, which enabled households to produce food surpluses, by replacing them with others that rendered the people incapable of meeting their own food needs. It is apparent that, while there were losers during the process of incorporation, others gained. Although the Gusii were already engaged in some form of commodity exchange, the introduction of a cash economy expanded these opportunities. Even at this period, we see a differentiation between going to the market to sell and going there to spend money. Furthermore, these commodity relations sometimes failed, as was the case in 1961, when there was a lack of food in the market, in spite of the people's declared capacity to purchase. Hence, at this point, the market caused as much uncertainty as may have been the case when the Gusii were dependent on cultivation only and were therefore constantly taking a chance with nature. On the other hand, incorporation brought about additional sources of food and reduced the fear of natural calamities, then the most threatening of the causes of food insecurity. This could be viewed in two ways. One, the availability of markets made it possible that households could meet their food needs with supplies from elsewhere. Two, those who faced constraints in engaging in cultivation could choose to acquire some or all of their food on the market, and therefore put their land and other resources to alternative use.

We have, however, also seen that the actual outcome from the processes that were taking place among the Gusii depended on how the people themselves

chose to proceed. First, in spite of the 'unlimited' potential to produce, households procured varied quantities of food, and they also stocked them variously. And even when it came to seeking and receiving assistance, people's levels of success were dissimilar. Partly for these reasons, only some of the Gusii migrated, while others remained behind. Furthermore, incorporation was also resisted. For example, whenever prices were considered too low, or the people anticipated a poor harvest, they declined to release much grain to the market. But this was only to a limited extent. Generally, people were forced to sell so as to raise cash income for other needs, including the paying of taxes. This further suggests that, in practice, life is far more complex than the relationships implied in the literature vis-à-vis the impact of commodity and non-commodity relations on food security.

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