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Ecology and Its Influences on Land Use and Ownership in Pre-colonial Mwea

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Abstract:

For decades, land use and ownership has remained an emotive issue in the modern history of Kenya and more so in frontier areas like Mwea, whose land use and ownership contests date back to the pre-colonial period. The sensitivity of this topic has created interest among scholars of different disciplines who avail information, particularly on the current causes of land-related conflict in Kenya. However, these studies tend to overlook the key role of ecology and geographical features in influencing land use and ownership among African communities. The ecological uniqueness of Mwea was a key factor that not only influenced land use and ownership in the Plain but also land-related conflicts before the advent of British colonizers. In terms of geographical location, Mwea Plain stood attractive to diverse communities and its neighbourhoods. Surrounded by marginal lands, safe for the northern side, the plain with its unique environment of open grassland in some areas, and bushes in others, in addition to the many rivers and streams that watered most parts of the plain, served to attract many communities whose interest was not only to utilize the ecology but to put claim to the land with such a wonderful ecology. Therefore, this paper examines ecology's role in land use and ownership in Mwea in the pre-colonial era.

Keywords: Ecology, climate, geographical setting, land use, and vegetation

1. Introduction

The social and economic life of communities across the world has always been shaped and influenced by ecological factors of the land such communities occupy. In fact, the history of humanity can largely be examined from the perspective of how human beings have adapted and utilized the land and environment they live in over the years. Long before the advent of colonial rule in Africa, Africans used to own land communally though individuals had certain rights in relation to land use and ownership. Generally, communities tended to occupy and or lay claim of ownership to land that could support their modes of production, such as hunting and gathering, crop cultivation, rearing of livestock, or a mixture of all these economic endeavours.

Land, which was the major factor of production among African communities during the pre-colonial era and perhaps during the colonial time, was well-guarded against intrusion by perceived foreigners who could threaten the existing patterns of land utilization and ownership or at least bring unnecessary competition for the scarce resource in the form of land. Natural features served as natural boundaries to mark one community territory from another. However, due to the porous nature of most of these natural boundaries, disputes were often witnessed in frontier areas as communities sought to acquire scarce natural resources such as water, grass, game, and minerals, among other resources that were in limited supply in certain community territories all the times or during certain seasons of the year. Ecological factors had a role to play in all this.

This paper examines the ecological setup of Mwea Division in the pre-colonial period and how the ecological uniqueness of this region influenced land use and ownership in the pre-colonial period. The paper explores the place of ecology in the development of inter-community conflicts that were witnessed in these lowlands before the establishment of colonial rule in Kenya. In addition, this paper unravels the economic activities that the different communities that inhabited Mwea plain or lands adjacent to the plain engaged in before the arrival of British Colonizers towards the end of the nineteenth century.

2. The Geographical Setting of Mwea Division

The economic history of African communities and other communities in the rest of the world can never be studied in total isolation or with utter disregard for geography since the latter influences the history of any given community, especially in matters revolving around land use and ownership. According to Kajoba, land use refers to the usage under

which any given piece of land may be put under prevailing environmental conditions¹This is a very important factor in any discussion about land use and ownership in the expansive Mwea plains during the pre-colonial times since environmental factors influenced land use in the area.

There is an inseparable relationship between history and geography, and no attempt should be made to isolate history from geography because human activities like hunting, gathering, and agriculture, among other means of livelihood, are largely influenced by the geographical setting of the land that a community occupies. In the same vein, the geography of a particular place influences the vegetation and general environment, which in turn plays a critical role in shaping the economic life of a given group of people. For instance, those communities inhabiting areas near forests tend to gravitate towards hunting and gathering because the forest ecology can support such economic activities. In contrast, those living near water bodies like lakes and oceans will tend to embrace fishing as their means of livelihood²

Land use in most parts of tropical Africa evolved from hunting and gathering through livestock keeping to shifting cultivation as communities that settled near or in the forest eventually started embracing agriculture³Archival and oral information that was in the course of this study gathered concurs with this trend of land use because in the pre-colonial period, the Ndia, Gichugu, Kamba, and other communities whose territories were adjacent to the Mwea plain, utilized the plain for hunting and gathering and grazing before opening it for shifting cultivation which was practically possible in the pre-colonial period because of less population density and abundance of land.

Geographically, the Mwea Plains, which later became Mwea Division and the largest division of Kirinyaga County, lies almost in the middle of the well-watered slopes of Mount Kenya, which is commonly referred to as Kirinyaga by the Agikuyu⁴) on the north-western side and marginal dry lands of Ukambani on the south-eastern side and the not too dry Fort Hall area with an altitude approximately 981 meters above sea level.

Mwea Division comprises land lying between Tana and Ruingazi rivers. On the northern side, Mwea Plains borders the slopes of Mount Kenya, whose altitude gradually reduces as one approaches the Kianjiru slopes. Eventually, the gently sloping land in nature tends to attain levelled flatness as one moves southwards, approaching Kimbimbi and Red Soil areas. ⁵On the western side, the plain areas of the Mwea Division border the upland and the sloping areas of Baricho and Kiwaruguru areas that the Ndia people predominantly occupied in the pre-colonial period. Therefore, the land slopes eastward from the high areas of Baricho and eventually attains a kind of depression in the Nguka areas, which, according to Chambers and Morris, used to be a big swamp during the pre-colonial period.⁶

Mount Kenya, with its permanent snow cap, is the source of the many rivers and streams that flow south-eastwards to dissect the Mwea Plain before they join river Tana that meanders eastward to the coastal region of Kenya before draining its water to the Indian Ocean⁷There are three major rivers that traverse the Mwea plain: Thiba, Nyamindi, and Murubara. They supplied water for both human and animal consumption. The Mwea Irrigation and the Settlement Scheme are located above the confluence of these three rivers. Besides these major rivers that dissect Mwea into clear ridges as they flow down to the plain areas of Mwea Division, on the eastern end, there is the River Ruingazi, which naturally demarcates the upper section of Mwea Division from Embu. Also, there is River Tana, which passes to the south-western side of what was traditionally considered Ndia territory and separates Mwea from Fort Hall (Murang, a).

Apart from the rivers mentioned above that were big in terms of their volume, thus qualifying to be classified as major rivers in Mwea Division, there are numerous small but permanent streams like Kiwe and Gakungu, among others, that add to the natural water sources in Mwea in addition to the number of ridges that exist in upper Mwea whose historical significance will be discussed later.

Gakungu and Kiwe streams are very important to this study because although their source is Ndia around Kagumo, the two flow south-eastwards to drain their water at the Nguka Swamp, which became the nucleus of the Mwea irrigation scheme where the first experimental plot of rice was set up before rice growing spread to the rest of Mwea Plain. Seasonal streams like Kawangware, and Mang'a, among others, also supply a good amount of water to the upper parts of the Mwea Plain.

During the pre-colonial period, rivers and streams in Mwea were not only important as water sources but also had historical significance regarding land use and ownership. It is because they formed ridges that served as natural boundaries to mark land belonging to different clans and sub-clans of the Gicugu and the Ndia people. In the pre-colonial times, these communities, which Godfrey Muriuki refers to as cousins of the Agikuyu⁸), inhabited the territory that bordered the Mwea Plain to the north east and west, respectively extending to Mount Kenya forest. The topography of ridges and valleys dominant in the upper areas of Mwea and lower parts of Gicugu and Ndia Divisions today greatly influenced land use and ownership during the pre-colonial period. This is because they demarcated land into different

¹ for a given period of time. (G. M. Kajoba, *Food Crisis in Zambia*, Lusaka, 1993, p.10)

² (Were, p. 72).

³ (Pritchard, 1979)

⁴ (Kenyatta, p. 12)

⁵H.S.K Mwaniki argues that Kianjiru slope is named after Njiru, who led the Mbere from Mbeti or Mwea after the Maasai raids. The name Red Soil for the area to the south of Kimbimbi came about during the colonial era when the colonial agricultural officers were classifying soil in Mwea in an effort to choose crops for different parts of the plain. This area, having been classified as having red soil, was called 'Red Soil'.

⁶For information on the Nguka swamp and how it became the nucleus of Mwea irrigation scheme, see Chambers and Morris (1973).

⁷ (Muriuki, *A History of the Agikuyu to 1904*, Ph.D. Thesis, 1969, p. 42)

⁸ (Muriuki, 1974, p. 51)

areas of occupation where clans and sub-clans could lay claim over a certain piece of land, called *Githaka* or bush, on a given ridge.

For the Ndia and Gichugu, major rivers in Mwea clearly marked their territory. Both Tana and Thiba rivers served to demarcate the Ndia territory, while the Gicugu historically claimed the territory between River Thiba and Nyamindi. These two groups of people, despite marking their territories, these two groups considered themselves one people, and both utilized parts of their territories, including Mwea Plain, which was named grazing fields by herders from the groups. Often, they united against any external aggression by neighbouring communities such as the Mbere and the Akamba, who, in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, could expand to Mwea plain, which they considered part of their territory and a frontier they could move to. The Embu, who linguistically and culturally are closely related to the Ndia and Gichugu, traditionally occupied the territory between Nyamindi and Rupingazi rivers. However, the boundary of the Embu was strategically shifted in the 1930s from Nyamindi to River Rupingazi to serve colonial interests when the government added Mwea to the Kikuyu Reserve, as per the recommendations of the Kenya Land Commission, as will be explained further in chapter three of this work.

Topographically, Mwea can be divided into two main topographical zones:

- The upper Mwea and
- The lower Mwea

The former comprises the areas immediately below the Sagana-Embu Road, which was built during the colonial times and which the colonial government designated as the boundary that demarcated the Mwea Plain from Gichugu and Ndia territories on the western and northern side, respectively, down to the Nguka areas moving straight north eastwards to River Rupingazi. This land is gently sloping compared to the lower Mwea, which is largely flat in nature except for areas along river Nyamindi that, with time, have created steep valleys as it flows southwards to Mwea from its Mount Kenya source⁹. The lower Mwea, as well as the middle parts of Mwea where MISS is located, comprises relatively flat land, so flat that it is prone to flooding during rainy seasons. Topographically speaking, this is referred to as the Mwea Plain, which was the source of conflicts between various African groups, as will be seen later.

The topography of a particular area influences the pattern of human settlement. Highland areas that receive adequate rainfall tend to be densely populated, while the low-lying lands appear to be sparsely populated because such lands are prone to frequent flooding. Traditionally, plains in pre-colonial Africa were, in most cases, inhabited by martial communities that fought and scared other communities from settling in the plains¹⁰. Seemingly concurring with this observation, Chambers asserts that this was the case in the pre-colonial Mwea by pointing out that areas bordering upper Mwea were highly populated by the Ndia and Gicugu people. As already noted, the boundaries of different community territories in Mwea were marked by rivers that flew from the slopes of Mount Kenya to the plain. The upper portions of these territories were densely populated, but the lower part, which extended to Mwea plain, was almost void of human settlement and was initially used for hunting and grazing by different communities before the Kamba opened the area for cultivation purposes and permanent settlement by the outbreak of the First War in 1914¹¹.

3. The Climate of Mwea: Rainfall and Temperature

In Kenya and other parts of East Africa, rainfall is mainly influenced by relief to a very considerable degree.¹² The upper parts of Mwea, being close to Mount Kenya, receive more rainfall annually than the lower parts of Mwea, which are characterized by dry weather conditions. The annual rainfall in the area is between 40 and 70 inches that is received on the slopes of Mount Kenya and then 30 inches that is received in the upper and lower parts of Mwea, respectively¹³. The adequacy and reliability of rainfall in upper Mwea in areas bordering Mount Kenya's slopes and fertile volcanic soil attracted dense settlements in the Ndia and the Gichugu divisions.

Despite the differences in the amount of rainfall received in different parts of Mwea, the whole of the region has two rainy seasons:

- The long rainy season that is experienced between the months of March and May, and
- The short rains that come between October and December

The Kikuyu divide the year into seasons corresponding to the rainy seasons:

- *Kimera Kia Njahi (Dolichos lablab)* seasons from March to July, and
- *Kimera kia Mwere* (millet season) seasons from October to December

Between these two seasons, there are:

- The chilly months (from July to September), known as *Gathano*, and
- The sunny months (from January to March), known as *Themithu*¹⁴

⁹ B.H Baker, 'Geology of the Mount Kenya Area', Report no. 79, Geological Survey of Kenya, Nairobi: Republic of Kenya, 1967, p.19 quoted in Chambers and Morris pp24-25 gives a detailed description of the nature of river Nyamindi as it passed through the expansive Mwea plain

¹⁰ (Boesen, p. 44).

¹¹ (Chambers and Morris, 1973, p. 40).

¹² (G. Muriuki, 1969, p. 45)

¹³ (G. Muriuki, 1969, p.44).

¹⁴ (Ibid, p. 45)

However, it is essential to note that the Ndia and the Gicugu people speak a kikuyu dialect that is slightly different from the kikuyu language spoken by the other Agikuyu people of Nyeri, Kiambu, and Muranga. Actually, they refer to the season of the long rains as simply *Kimera kia Mbura nene* and the short rain season as *kimera kia mbura nini*. The dry season is referred to as *Bingo ya riua* (the sunny season).

Apart from adequate rainfall that attracted high settlement in the upper areas of Mwea, the type of soil in the area also contributed to the dense population. The area had loam volcanic soils suitable for crop growing, unlike clay soil in the lower sections of the Mwea Plain that discouraged cultivation due to flooding. Therefore, good soil and adequate rainfall attracted the agriculturist Gicugu and Ndia to settle in large numbers in upper Mwea. As Muriuki Nyaga avers:

Majority of our people (Ndia) decided to settle here (Gakoigo) because we could comfortably grow sorghum, beans, maize, and other crops for our food and, more often, to feed other communities whose land was not as productive as ours. This was difficult down in Mwea, which generally received little rain compared to these upper areas. Apart from low rainfall, the clay soil was a big problem as it could easily flood whenever it rained.¹⁵

Endowed with adequate rainfall and good fertile soil, the Ndia territory was productive, and for a long time, it served as a food basket to the Kamba people and trade caravans that traversed the area heading to Mount Kenya which was a significant source of ivory and other trading items¹⁶

Although the Ndia and the Gicugu people, like other Kikuyus, were predominantly agriculturalists, they also kept livestock, notably goats, sheep, and cattle. While almost every family had cattle, large hers were a preserve of the wealthy members of the community like Chief Njega wa Gioko and Gutu, who perhaps over time had managed to use their leadership position to acquire a large number of cattle from incoming *Ahoi* as claimed by one informant who requested anonymity¹⁷The goats were the most common form of livestock among the people, and they played an important role in their lives. Apart from being sources of food, clothing, and bedding, goats were used in the payment of dowry in addition to being slaughtered for important social ceremonies like sacrifices¹⁸

Livestock being an essential component of the Ndia and Gicugu economy, the people had to have adequate pasture. The Ndia and Gicugu, therefore, preserved and utilized the lower parts of their territory (Mwea plain), which was ecologically considered not so good for cultivation and human settlement as grazing fields. Unlike in upper areas where an individual could lay claim over a given parcel of land for having been the first to lay claim, grazing fields of Mwea were communally owned by the Ndia and Gichugu people. However, their claim over Mwea was contested by other neighbouring communities that were also keen to utilize the Mwea ecology to support their different means of livelihood.

4. Soils and Vegetation of Mwea

In pre-colonial Africa, land was highly valued as a factor of production. In most communities across the continent, the term 'land' was synonymous with soil because it is the one that provided a medium upon which most economic activities, like food crop growing, among others, thrived. Africans did not have the modern technologies and skills for testing and classifying soil type, but more often than not, the use of a particular land was guided by the soil type and vegetation of the land. Therefore, the soil and vegetation in a given place played a significant role in shaping the economic life of pre-colonial Africans that owned and used land in a given area.

The geographical location of Mwea, discussed above, influences the type of soil and vegetation of the area. Since Mwea division is in close proximity to Mount Kenya, the formation of soil, to a considerable extent, was influenced by major volcanic eruptions of Mount Kenya, which, according to the geologists, occurred during the Pliocene Period.¹⁹Mount Kenya's slopes, which today form the Gichugu Division of Kirinyaga County, comprise loam volcanic soils that combine with high altitude and rainfall to make the area suitable for tea farming. The lower parts of the slopes border the upper parts of Mwea Division, which is separated from Gichugu by the Embu-Sagana Road. Thus, traces of red volcanic soils are present in the upper parts of Mwea. However, the high temperature cannot allow tea growing as is the case in the upper areas of Gichugu. The rest of Mwea Division has two major types of soil: Black morillonitic clay, commonly referred to as 'black cotton soil' or simply as clay soil by the majority of the people, and

The red loam soil or simply called the red soil, courtesy of the Department of Agriculture's classification of soil in Mwea area²⁰

The basement system of these two soil types consists of solidified lava which geologists attribute to the volcanic eruptions of Mount Kenya²¹The oldest Mount Kenya lava that rests in the basement can clearly be seen with naked eyes in areas of Mwea that River Nyamindi dissects as it flows from its source in the Mount Kenya forest. Draining a large volume of water in sloppy areas before it reaches the plain areas of Mwea Nyamindi has, over the years, eroded the topsoil and soft lava to form deep valleys through which it flows, especially in upper Mwea in Mururi areas. The deep valleys ensure a lot of water reaches Mwea as not many canals have been dug to draw water from Nyamindi. This is an essential factor that influenced the colonial government to set up an irrigation scheme in the Mwea plain as it was assured of constant and adequate water for irrigation.

Geologists like Baker have stressed that the last eruptions of Mount Kenya took place in the middle and upper Pleistocene, which can be dated to about 2.5 million to 11000 years ago. These eruptions were responsible for the formation of a flat surface comprising soft lava or basalts that are common along River Thiba. This, in turn, retarded both

¹⁵Muriuki Nyaga, O.I. April 10, 2020. See Also D.W Philipson, Later Pre-history of Eastern and Southern Africa, London, 1985, p. 56 how rainfall and soils are conditions that have influenced the development of agriculture in Africa.

¹⁶ (Chambers, 1969, p. 56).

¹⁷ (Anonymous, O.I, April 15, 2020).

¹⁸ (Muriuki, 1969, p. 47).

¹⁹This is a period in the geological time scale that lasted 5.3 to 2.5 million years ago. www.geologypage.

²⁰ Chambers and Morris, 1973, p. 31

²¹ (Ibid, p.33).

drainage of water and its accompanying erosion leading to the accumulation of sediments and the formation of black cotton soil in the middle Mwea, which traditionally was prone to flooding.²²

Black cotton soil is the most dominant soil type in the irrigation areas of Mwea plain. This soil is characterized by deep cracks on the surface and a mulchy granular when dry. However, when wet, the black cotton soil is generally sticky and very plastic and tends to form a strong blocky structure, thus preventing proper drainage. This tends to make the black cotton soil unsuitable for cultivation of most crops except rice which does well in waterlogged conditions, especially under flood or basin irrigation²³As already mentioned, the other soil type in Mwea Plain is the 'Red soils' that are dominant in most parts below Kimbimbi as one moves south-eastwards to Mathangauta. In fact, the area is better known as Red Soil owing to its soil type. According to Chambers, these red soils were highly porous and thus presented many problems to the colonial government when it tried to establish paddy rice irrigation since they could not hold water for long owing to their good drainage. This is why, the government decided to exclude the red soil from paddy development and allocated tenants' plots to develop rain-fed agriculture.²⁴

The types of soils in Mwea went a long way to influence vegetation in the plain and, subsequently, the economic activities that people engaged in traditionally. The lower and middle parts of the Mwea plain are comprised of black cotton soil or clay soil. Chambers contends that due to this type of soil, whose water retention capacity is generally high, this area was prone to flooding during rainy seasons when most rivers and streams increased the volume of flow. The residents generally referred to this area as 'Rurii', which denoted a flat land comprising clay soil that was commonly used as grazing fields by the Ndia and Gichugu, especially during the dry seasons when other sections of the plain and neighbouring areas dried up.²⁵In this section of the plain, grass was the dominant vegetation cover, thus making the plain assume open grassland savanna that provided good pasture for livestock from the Ndia and Gicugu people as well as other neighbouring communities like the Akamba and the Mbeere, whose territories were generally dry.²⁶ Apart from grass, the area had short shrubs that often provided pasture to sheep and goat herders even when grass was reduced due to high stock or prolonged drought.

The grass vegetation continued to dominate the middle areas of the Mwea plain but gradually started diminishing as one moved from the middle areas of Mwea plain towards the eastern end of the plain, where bush vegetation, mainly *lantana camara*, appeared to replace the open grass fields. This bushy vegetation covered much of the eastern parts edges of the plain down south to the confluence of River Thiba and River Tana, which marked the end of the Ndia territory. Apart from changing vegetation in this section of the plain, soil type also changed as the black cotton soil (clay soil) that was dominant in the central areas like Thiba running to Mathiga-ini areas gave way to largely red soil and rock-basement which today serve as quarries to supply building stones. The bushy environment in parts of the Mwea Plain attracted various groups like the Mbeere and Kamba, who wanted to utilize the area as their hunting and gathering fields.

It is, therefore, right to conclude that:

- Soil and vegetation in Mwea during the pre-colonial period largely influenced land use, and
- Inhabitants had mastered their environment to enable them to utilize it in a way that they avoided hazards

It was observed by Mwangi Mugweru:

All this land down to what is now Thiba and even further was a common grazing field for our animals, especially during the dry season when we could not find enough pasture elsewhere. During the dry season, other communities from the neighbouring areas like the Ikamba [Akamba] used to come here with their animals in search of pastures. Sometimes if one was not careful, the black soil could give soreness to his animals. The visitors did not know this at first, and as young boys, we used to laugh at them when their animals would get stuck in the mud, areas our fathers always warned us to avoid grazing. In fact, people used to say marshy areas matomboya [marshy areas] could swallow goats and sheep alive²⁷

While this may sound quite hilarious, it clearly shows how children were taught how to identify land safe for grazing and those to shun for the safety of livestock.

5. Movement of Various Groups into Mwea Area in the Pre-colonial Period

Mwea Plain, which forms the largest area of the Mwea Division, is located in the middle of the well-watered slopes of Mount Kenya on the north. The marginal lands of Fort Hall (Murang'a), Mbeere and Ukambani areas that from history are characterized by erratic rainfall, drought, and famine.

These environmental hazards triggered outward migration of people to the neighbouring frontier Mwea Plain whose soil, pasture, water, and other environmental factors promised better life to the incoming populations that were not only desperate to secure human livelihoods but also their stock.

The never-ending conflicts related to land use and ownership in Mwea can be traced back to years before colonialism, when various African communities moved to the low lands of Mwea. With each group keen to establish *de facto* ownership of land and resources in the area, seeds of land-related conflicts were sown and then only to be watered by acts of the colonial state as it sought to promote and serve colonial goals. The map below illustrates the movement of various African groups to Mwea.

²²(B.H Baker, Geology of the Mount Kenya Area, Report No. 79, Geological Survey Kenya, 1967, pp. 19-20 cited in Chambers and Morris, 1973, p33).

²³(Chambers & Morris, 1973, p.102).

²⁴(Ibid, p. 103).

²⁵Ibid, p. 44

²⁶(F. Munro, p. 121)

²⁷(Mwangi Mugweru, O.I. March 10, 2020).

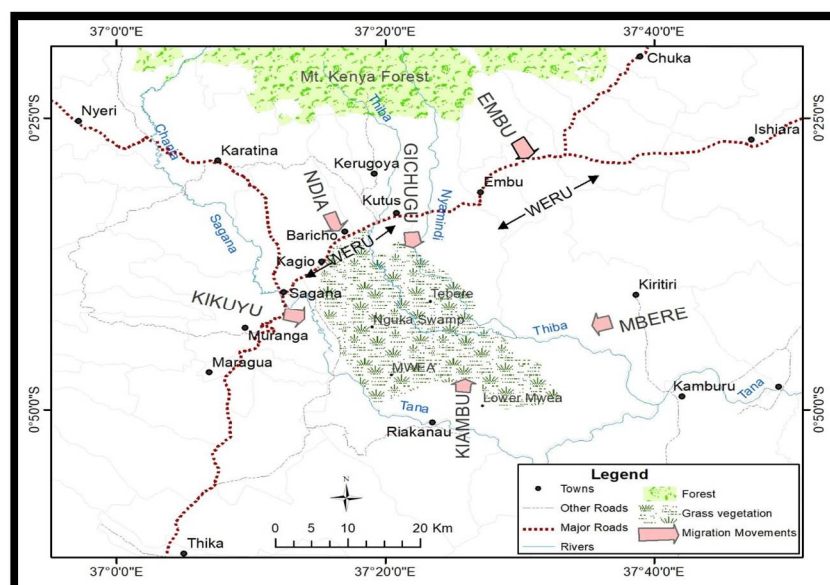


Figure 1: A Map Showing Movement of Various African Groups to Mwea Plains
Source: Adapted from Chambers, 1969, P. 39

Mwea Plain, which today is densely populated and produces more than 80% of rice in the Republic of Kenya, was never settled by any African group at least by 1850, going by the accounts of European missionaries and travellers. In 1848, for instance, Ludwig Krapf became the first European to spot Mount Kenya as he followed a trade route from Kitui towards the Mountain he had 'discovered'. Krapf reached the banks of River Tana and clearly saw, across this river, an open plain called 'Muea' that, according to him, was not inhabited²⁸ However, the lack of human settlement in this area does not mean that the area was vacant. Instead, only permanent settlement was lacking, but in one way or the other, intermittent use of the plain was going on. In total contrast with the years of the 1850s when lower Mwea was unoccupied, in the last years of the nineteenth century, various groups were already beginning to settle here. This is especially so in the case of the upper parts of Mwea, which were intensively settled. For instance, by 1907, areas near Baricho were intensively settled not only by the Ndia but also by some old Swahili traders²⁹

By the time the British were coming to colonize Kenya, the area that is today below Old Sagan-Embu and within Nyamindi and Tana rivers was claimed by five different African communities, namely; Akamba, Aembu, Mbeere, Ndia, and Gichugu from different directions. A quick discussion of the gradual movement of these groups into Mwea, as illustrated in figure 1, is key to understanding the roots of land-related disputes in Mwea Division.

Before the arrival of European colonizers in Kenya in 1895, most African communities were comfortably settled in areas whose ecology could support their means of livelihood. By the seventeenth century Akamba community, who occupied areas to the south-east of Mwea Plain, had already settled in Mbooni Hills, having moved gradually in the northward direction via Chullu Hills, Makueni, Nzauni, and finally to Machakos, which became their dispersal point in the eighteenth century³⁰ This migration resulted from population growth, a declining threat from Maasai, who used to raid them for cattle, and environmental hazards like drought and famine. Before the eighteenth century, the Kamba people were predominantly livestock keepers. However, by the turn of this very century, this community began embracing a mixed economy which made them start gradual expansion to areas that could support the livestock economy, crop cultivation, as well as hunting and gathering, which they engaged in to supplement their diet and acquire trade items. As a result, the community started looking beyond Machakos and Kitui areas that were considerably marginal and prone to low rainfall, resulting in a drought that threatened human and livestock survival.

Combining pastoral and crop farming activities, the movement of the Kamba was influenced, to a considerable extent, by ecological factors such as the availability of pasture, reliable rainfall, and availability of good hunting grounds. The absence of these prime factors in Kamba territory forced the pastoralists, hunters, and cultivators to gradually expand to the frontier areas such as the Mwea Plain just across River Tana, which, apart from being sparsely occupied, provided pasture, good hunting grounds, and fertile soil for agriculture. Munro describes this movement of the Kamba to areas bordering their territory as the 'Frontier People'.³¹

In terms of searching for pasture for their livestock, the Kamba were keen to take advantage of those frontier areas that provided good grazing fields with minimal interruptions from other communities. It is Mutiso who elucidates this discussion by pointing out that in the nineteenth century, the Kamba grazing areas extended from as far as Holla in the north-eastern to as far as Garissa. To the west, the Kamba grazed the whole of Yatta plateau as far as Mwea Plains, Katwa'anyaa (today referred to as Gatuanyaga by the Kikuyu), and around OI Donyo Sabuk near Thika. To the south, they

²⁸ (Chambers & Morris, 1973, p. 36).

²⁹ (Ibid, pp.37-38).

³⁰ (L.M Kisovi, *Changing Land Use-Policy and Population Problems in Kitui District, Kenya, 1992, p. 92*).

³¹ (L.M Kisovi, 1992, p. 94).

grazed up to what is now the Tsavo National Park³²It is imperative to note here that the Akamba were not the sole community that grazed in these frontier areas such as Mwea. Other communities also utilized these pastures. The Kamba moved to these areas during the dry seasons and then went back to their ancestral land once it rained. However, when they eventually opened Mwea Plain for the cultivation of peas and other crops in the early 1900s, their stay in the lower parts of the plain gained permanency and eventually claimed land ownership in the area.

In terms of climate, the Kamba territory in Machakos area shared a natural border, which was River Tana, with lower Mwea that was better suited ecologically than Kamba land that often experienced a severe famine, so severe that the Kamba had to cross River Tana to seek food from the Ndia to whom they gave out their women and children in exchange of food as observed by Munro:

Akamba occupied land that was generally dry most times of the year. Famine was a recurrent experience for the people of both Machakos and Kitui districts. Living as they did on the eastern fringe of the highlands with its unreliable rainfall, their agricultural supplies were limited. Hunting and gathering could provide relief in such conditions. Moreover, the Akamba looked beyond their home areas for food. The Machakos people turned to Kikuyu land, where they exchanged livestock or pawned women and children for quantities of grains³³

The most severe famines in Kamba land were the famines of the late eighteenth century which lasted until the early next century. During this period, the famous *Yua ya Ilendu* (the staggering famine) and *Yua ya musyula- kyongo* (the scorched skulls famine) struck Kamba land following a prolonged drought. These famines of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were so severe that they are still remembered by the Kamba people and provided them with a chronological framework so that the family and community milestones, such as births or deaths, are remembered in relation to a particular famine. These famines forced the Kamba to cross River Tana with their livestock into Mwea, where they sought food from the Ndia people, who inhabited a territory that for a long time served as a food basket not only for the Kamba but also for the Swahili traders. It served as the food basket also to some dry parts of Central Kenya, like Fort Hall (Murang'a) areas to the west of Ndia. In the words of Wilson Gachoki Kibara:

Not all the Kamba people who came to Mwea and other areas of Ndia during the time of famine returned to Ukambani when the famine ended. Some settled among the Ndia, where they were employed to look after cattle by some wealthy people, especially leaders like Chief Njega. Some intermarried with our people and even learnt how to speak our language (Kikuyu) so well that you could not even tell that they were outsiders³⁴

The temporal migrations of the Akamba into Kikuyu land were followed by their permanent settlement and eventual claim of ownership of the lower parts of Mwea plain. The Kamba are credited with having opened the lower Mwea for crop production and permanent human settlement, which made them claim ownership of the area.

However, their settlement in lower Mwea was gradual, perhaps starting with one man and his nuclear family before other members of his extended family came to join him later. In this case, Chambers asserts:

On the lower Mwea, the first permanent settlements were established by 1914 on the Tana River at the two main fords connecting Mwea with Ukamba territory. The leader of one group who had become adopted into an Ndia clan was an ex-policeman from Kitui. In order to protect himself from wild game, he encouraged six other extended families to come across the Tana. By 1927, these pioneering families had begun to accept Ndia cattle to be grazed in return for grain foods from Kagio³⁵

As Kibara, quoted above, it is insisted that the Ndia employed the Kamba as herders to graze their cattle in Mwea. Chambers contends that the Ndia had to pay the Kamba with food grains to be allowed to graze their animals in the lower areas to which the Kamba immigrants had already started laying claim. The difference in these two narratives on grazing goes to show the level of land contestations surrounding land ownership in lower Mwea. The Kamba were keen to demonstrate that they were the land owners and hence imposed a grazing fee on Ndia livestock, while the Ndia were out to show that the land was theirs and had only employed the Kamba as herdsmen.

While it could be true that the first Kamba settler invited six other extended family members for security against wild animals in Mwea, it is also probable that he saw the area as suitable in terms of environment and game that his kinsmen could hunt. This is well supported by the observation made by Lafontaine, the Provincial Commissioner for Central Province, in 1936, following the increased number of the Kamba people in Mwea, which by this time was considered purely a Kikuyu Reserve. He noted that:

...it will be an uphill task to remove the Wakamba from the Mwea area. It is a well-known fact that the Akamba people like remote places of this kind where they can hunt unmolested to their hearts' content. Any attempt to force these people, who are now scattered in different parts of lower Mwea, is likely to face untold resistance from them. ³⁶

As the Kamba were expanding their territory to colonize frontier areas of the lower parts of the Mwea Plain and open it to their hunting, grazing, and cultivation, the Ndia and Gicugu, who occupied areas to the northwest and east, respectively, were gradually expanding their cultivation activities towards the Mwea areas that traditionally had been reserved as communal grazing land. In the pre-colonial era, the Ndia and Gicugu referred to the upper parts of Mwea as 'Weru', which denoted 'an empty land' that was void of human settlement. These were the lower parts of their territories

³² (Mutiso, 1975, p34 quoted from Kisovi, *Changing Land Use-Policy and Population Problems in Kitui District, Kenya, 1992*, p. 92, p. 94).

³³ (Munro, 1975, p. 21).

³⁴ (Wilson Gachoki Kibara, O.I, May 7, 2020).

³⁵ (Chambers & Morris, 1973, p.41).

³⁶KNA. ADM. 26/9/1936 PC Central to DC Embu.

that were adjacent to Mwea. As noted earlier, the territories of the Ndia and Gichugu, who are closely related, were demarcated by rivers that served as natural boundaries. The Ndia laid claim to the area between Tana and Thiba rivers, while the Gichugu claimed ownership of the land area between Thiba and Nyamindi Rivers. On the eastern end of the Gichugu territory were the Embu people, who traditionally occupied and claimed ownership of the area between Nyamindi and Thuci rivers.

According to Muriuki, the Ndia and Gichugu were settled on the slopes of Mount Kenya to the south by the 1750s as other groups of Kikuyu gradually migrated to their present areas of settlement in Nyeri, Murang'a Kiambu, and Kirinyaga. The latter region was created after 1963 and comprised Mwea, Ndia, and Gichugu Divisions (the last was administratively transferred from Embu District to Kirinyaga in the same year).³⁷ The Ndia and Gichugu, being cultivators, largely settled on the slopes of Mount Kenya to the north of Mwea. Their agricultural activities at the time the British were arriving in Kenya had not gone below the Embu-Sagana Road, which, according to Chambers, marked the end of individual cultivation fields and the beginning of common grazing fields to the south, i.e., upper Mwea.

A closer look at their traditional land tenure system is important to understand how the Ndia and the Gichugu came to lay claim virtually to the whole of Mwea. Among the Gichugu and the Ndia sections of the Agikuyu, land as an asset was owned communally and more specifically organized on the basis of clans (*mihiriga*), where each of the ten clans of the Agikuyu among the Gichugu and the Ndia occupied land within a certain ridge. A clan in Agikuyu is comprised of several sub-clans (*mbari*). The *Mbari* could lay claim to a certain frontier and turn it into their land by clearing and then cultivating it before any other sub-clan. *Mbari* could own more than one region. Hence, they were said to be the owners of bushes (*ene ithaka*).³⁸

Land belonging to a particular clan or sub-clan was highly guarded, and no single individual was allowed to enter into any transaction involving leasing or selling (which was not thought of among the Agikuyu since land belonged to the community where the living members were holding it in trust for posterity) land without lengthy consultation with *mbari* elders.

If there was any piece of land on the *githaka* which had never been brought under cultivation or had remained uncultivated for a long time in the estimation of clan elders, as was the case of the Mwea plain, such land was reserved for grazing or woodland or as a place for interring the dead. Such land consequently became the joint property of the clan. Again, a land that lay uncultivated could be subject to dominant claims resulting from cultivation in the recent past. Even when free, these may be pre-emptive claims upon it from members of the *mbari* who owned and cultivated land adjacent to it.

Among the Ndia and Gichugu, a typical garden plot took the form of a strip that was commonly referred to as *ruthanju* (strip). The owner of the *ruthanju* had the pre-emptive right to expand his cultivation into any uncultivated land adjacent to his piece. As was well-indicated by the Kenya Land Commission in 1933, the Agikuyu nation was in the pre-colonial era bound by a belt of forest on most sides, one of which was the Mount Kenya forest that bordered the Ndia and the Gichugu territories. This being the case, the people from these communities expanded their strips northwards into the neighbouring Mount Kenya forest to cater to the rising food demand as the population rose with time. The Ndia and Gichugu people reserved land in the southern part of their territory (Mwea) for communal grazing owing to its marsh condition was considered unsuitable for human settlement.³⁹

The breaking of new land in the forest was abruptly cut short following the fixing of the forest boundaries across the colony to conserve and perhaps protect the forest from encroachment and destruction. With this directive in place, the Ndia and the Gichugu had to look south to the Mwea plain for any additional land for cultivation since the northern side of their territory was a no-go zone, having been declared government forest land. Sections of the plain that hitherto had been reserved for grazing were now gradually converted into cultivatable land. Overgrazing was inevitable, and conflicts with neighbouring Kamba and Mbeere were bound to visit the plain as these neighbours, too, sought to utilize Mwea Plain, a frontier area of their territories.

The outer boundaries of all the major *githaka* holdings were marked by natural features such as a river or a ravine, or by planted trees or African lilies, which once planted were said to propagate themselves forever. Sometimes heaps of stones, considered indestructible, were also used, while, in some instances, large stones were sunk into the ground and human hairs stuck under them as future proof of boundaries.⁴⁰

For a long time, the Gicugu and Ndia, who would later make a case before the KLC in a bid to regain their 'lost land', never considered permanent settlement in Mwea though they were using it as grazing for their livestock. As noted above, they used to refer to the upper parts of Mwea as '*Weru*'.⁴¹ To these two groups of people, though Mwea offered good grazing fields, especially during the dry seasons, it did not constitute what they could call suitable land for permanent human settlement. This is because, during the wet season, this area suffered from malaria and other diseases on account of waterlogging, which threatened both human and livestock survival.⁴² One informant, John Muthii, aptly described the earlier attitude of the Ndia when he pointed out that:

³⁷KNA. Native Affairs General Policy, 1920-23, the file gives details of the amalgamation and reorganization of Kikuyu districts of Fort Hall, Nyeri, and also Embu.

³⁸For a detailed discussion of Kikuyu land Tenure, see Colony Report of Native Land Tenure in Kikuyu Province (The Maxwell Report) of 1929.

³⁹(The Maxwell Report, 1929, pp 95-169).

⁴⁰(Ibid, p. 195).

⁴¹Morris and Chambers explain that the word *Weru* was used to mean an empty land with no people that was used for grazing purposes.

⁴²(Chambers and Morris, p.41)

Mwea often flooded during the rainy season when streams like Gakungu, Kiwe, and other rivers that pass through the plain flooded following heavy rains in the upper areas. This made the land marshy, and it was even difficult to build a house or grow crops in most areas of Mwea, such as Nguka. It was also risky for us to think of settling down here as there were many wild animals, including hyenas, that could easily attack people and kill their goats and sheep⁴³

With this attitude about the unsuitability of Mwea, Gichugu, and Ndia, leaders easily welcomed *Ahoi* (landless people) from other areas like Kiambu and Fort Hall (Murang'a) to settle in the upper regions. As Chambers observes, these *Ahoi* were the first people to settle and cultivate various crops in the upper areas of Mwea. However, the narrative changed as land shortage continued to bite during the early years of British colonial rule in Kenya. The Ndia and Gichugu started evicting the *Ahoi* one after another in a bid to recapture their land.⁴⁴

To the west of Mwea across the Tana were the hilly lands of Fort Hall (Murang'a), whose areas adjacent to Mwea were generally dry most of the time, forcing the Agikuyu from the area to descend from the hills to the expansive Mwea plains in search of grass and water for their livestock during the dry spells. Harsh environmental conditions in lower areas of Fort Hall in what is today Kiharu region made the Murang'a people migrate to Mwea, as was narrated by Josphat Mbutu, now settled at Rukanga Village in Mwea:

You know, even today, Gaturi, Kabuta, and most parts of Murang'a along the river are very dry. Even in the early times, things could worsen when rains failed or rained inadequately. The place became bare, and dusty, and one could count the number of stones in the land even from a distance. To save their animals, people from Murang'a had to cross Thagana to Mwea, where they could at least get pasture and water for their livestock. They used to graze in Mwea sometimes for several months or even years until it rained on their land when they could eventually return home⁴⁵

The Agikuyu of Murang'a, therefore, became the fourth African group that used to venture into Mwea for grazing purposes. However, as noted by Chambers, they, too, like the Ndia, did not consider permanent settlement not because of ecological factors but because of the risk that trade caravans that passed through the region, usually armed firearms, posed in addition to avoiding conflicts with the Ndia people.⁴⁶ Going by colonial administrative reports of 1940s and 1950s the situation in Fort Hall had not changed in any way when the place received little or no rain at all. In 1948, for instance, Ainsworth, the District Commissioner for Fort Hall, reported that half of the population in Fort Hall had migrated to Mwea due to drought and famine that had visited the area.⁴⁷

The last groups that moved to Mwea and laid claim over land ownership in Mwea were the Mbeere, who are linguistically and culturally related to the Aembu people. According to Mwaniki, the Mbeere in the pre-colonial era occupied a territory to the south-east of Mwea, an area they settled in the 1750s after moving gradually from Chuka-Igamba Ng'ombe area when other Eastern Bantu communities like the Agikuyu were settling around the Mount Kenya.⁴⁸ They had a mixed economy that entailed crop cultivation and livestock keeping. Apart from these economic activities, the community engaged in hunting and honey gathering to supplement their diet. Ecologically, their territory, unlike that of their Embu cousins that had fertile volcanic soils in addition to receiving reliable and adequate rainfall that allowed extensive agriculture, was both arid and semi-arid, which forced the community to adopt different economic activities as an insurance against frequent drought that afflicted their habitation.

Inhabiting such a hostile environment, the Mbeere had to look beyond the area they had settled initially. Hence, crossing River Thiba into lower Mwea, whose ecology comprised open grassland and thick bushes with rivers and streams dissecting them, promised better pastures for their livestock, good hunting grounds, and fields that could allow extensive honey gathering activities. The movement of the Mbeere into Mwea led to their permanent settlement in the Plain, which they called *Mbeti*. This settlement was, however, not without contestation from the Ndia people, who held that the whole of Mwea was part of their territory and thus tried to form an alliance with the Akamba to force the Mbeere out of *Mbeti* without success.

Following the devastating rinderpest pandemic accompanied by a prolonged drought, famine, and human and animal diseases in the 1890s,⁴⁹ the Maasai turned to raiding neighbouring communities for cattle to raise the number of their cattle since they had lost most of them to the pandemic. The Maasai raiding expeditions took them to the Mwea Plain, where the Mbeere had been grazing their livestock for quite some time.⁵⁰ These Maasai raids deprived the Mbeere of a great part of their livestock and forced them out of the Mwea Plain to their present country east of the Rupingazi and Thiba rivers. However, a small number of the Mbeere people, led by a person named Njiru, settled in upper areas or hilly sections

⁴³ (John Muthii, O.I. March 21, 2020).

⁴⁴ The effects of colonial rule on land matters and how the Ndia and the Gichugu agitated to regain their lost land will be discussed in chapter three of this study.

⁴⁵ (Josphat Mbutu, O.I. March 20, 2020).

⁴⁶ (Chambers & Morris, 1973, p. 41).

⁴⁷ KNA. ADM25/6/11/22.1936 Wakamba in Mwea letter from District Commissioner Machakos pleading with Provincial Commissioner for Central province to have the Akamba who were being kicked out of Mwea to go back to their reserve be allowed to go back and harvest their crops before leaving the plain.

⁴⁸ (H.S. K Mwaniki, *The Living History of Embu and Mbeere to 1906*, (Nairobi, 1974), pp. 24-25).

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⁵⁰ (For a detailed account of the ecological disasters afflicting East, Central, and Southern African communities, see p. Waweru, 'Ecology Control and Development of Pastoralism among the Samburu of North-Central Kenya 1739-1909' Masters Dissertation, Kenyatta University, 1993) (H.S. K, Mwaniki, 1974, p. 23).

of Mwea, where they engaged in cultivation activities. Today, this area of Mwea is called Kianjiru. After this, Mbere leader led a group of the Mbeere out of Mwea Plain to settle in this range. This acted as a fort against Maasai incursion.⁵¹

According to the Mbeere folklore, the whole of lower Mwea was their land, and their territory expanded up to the areas around Mboinjuki (see map 1). However, when they were forced out of Mwea by successive Maasai raids, the Ndia took advantage of expanding their grazing activities to Mbeti⁵² Friction between the two communities over land in the lower reaches of the plain was common. However, elders from the two sides played an essential role in resolving land-related disputes and negotiating for peace to avert bloodshed in the plain. As Fredrick Muchira informed the study:

Our people could sometimes fight with the Mbeere, who are our neighbours across the river. Sometimes we were very much at peace with them even after they entered our land without our permission. However, when we fought with them, our leaders like Njega could arrange meetings with Kombo wa Munyiri to negotiate for peace between the two communities. Our men often pulled down the beehives belonging to the Mbere people because they pitched them on our land, which led to conflict between the Ndia and the Mbeere on the lower sides of Mwea⁵³

Before colonialism and the early colonial era, Mwea Plain offered hunting, grazing, and cultivation opportunities to diverse communities. All these elements combined to make the land in the plain a highly desirable and contested resource for any group of people in the adjacent areas and far beyond the porous borders of this plain. In a romantic quip, Mwai Wamugunda noted:

Mwea was like a beautiful girl in a village full of ugly girls. Every man would go and even fight to have this beauty. IKamba [Kamba] and the Mbeere wanted to have our girl [Mwea] by force. We had to force them out with the same force. However, they did not give up coming to Mwea because their land was very dry compared to ours. The reason is that even when other parts of our nation experienced drought, Mwea remained with good grass and water.⁵⁴

6. Conclusion

This paper makes it clear that ecology and geographical location of the Mwea Plain were essential factors in making Mwea a very attractive region to diverse communities prior to the advent of British imperialism. Surrounded by marginal lands, safe for the northern side, the plain with its unique environment of open grassland in some areas, and bushes in others, in addition to the many rivers and streams that watered most parts of the plain, served to attract many communities whose interest was not only to utilize the ecology but to put claim to the land with such a wonderful ecology. It has also been established that at the advent of colonial rule in Kenya, five African groups: Ndia, Gichugu, Kamba, and the Agikuyu from Fort Hall and Mbere, had already moved to the Mwea Plain or at least were making seasonal use of land in the region. African land use in Mwea was guided by the ecology of the land. For instance, the grassland parts of Mwea plain were used as pasturelands and bushy vegetation for hunting and gathering, while residential areas were located in upper areas which were free from flooding.

In this paper, we have shown that different African modes of production existed and preceded the colonial government's development and irrigation plans for the Mwea plain. To underscore this, these modes of production were: hunting, gathering, livestock keeping, and cultivation of food crops such as peas, and sorghum, among others. However, the colonial state, with total disregard for these well-established African modes of production and land tenure system in the Mwea Plains, went on to set an irrigation scheme and introduce foreign land policies that brought notable changes to land use and ownership in Mwea Division and subsequently upset the ecological balance that these communities had all along maintained.

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