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Mildred A.J. Ndeda

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Population movement, settlement and the construction of society to the east of Lake Victoria in precolonial times: the western Kenyan case

Mildred A. J. Ndeda

The communities' in Nyanza and Western Kenya situated to the east of Lake Victoria have come from various directions to their present day settlements. They encompass two linguistic families the Bantu and the Nilotic. These communities came from different directions but interacted with each other and borrowed extensively from each other. The Abaluhya sub-groups which moved to western Kenya from eastern Uganda are likely to have been the earliest settlers in the lake region. According to some scholars it could be inferred that the Abaluhya and Gusii people represent the spearhead of migration in this region. The Gusii and Luhya settlers to the Lake Victoria are the descendants of possibly the earliest Bantu groups to have arrived in Kenya, and are believed to have introduced iron smelting and the use of iron tools to the region. The period between 1500 and 1850 saw the migration of many Bantu clans and families from eastern Uganda into western Kenya and the emergence of the present day Abaluyia, Abagusii, and Abakuria communities. The formation of the Abaluyia entailed the fusion of the pre-1500 inhabitants of western province with those Bantu groups that arrived in the region in the 16th century and 18th centuries. While the Bantu who lived to the north of Lake Victoria evolved into a single community (the Abaluyia) the Bantu to the south of Winam Gulf evolved into three distinct societies the Abagusii, Abakuria and Abasuba. Similarly the Luo from the Sudan traversed Uganda which was the centre of their encounter with the Bantu. As they moved on the interactions between them persisted right into their settlements in the region. They continue to interact extensively in modern western Kenya. But each group has a history that should be detailed because as these people groups interacted with each other they did it as smaller entities, for instance as clans and their immediate neighbours. It was occasional that several clans combined to fight the Bantu or other neighbours. The territorial maneuvering by the three groups was not always peaceful as war over the land often erupted. However the interethnic relations between the Bantu and the Nilotes were not confined to confrontation. The Luo, Luhya and the Gusii shared much. Their economic systems were adapted to the same environments and their common words for domestic crops and tools indicate an intimate contact. Moreover between 1870 and 1900 they had fixed markets where all groups exchanged their products of different environments. These groups did not live in isolation from each other they had various levels of interaction thus practicing convergence and conversion. This paper has examined the movement, settlement and the construction of society to the east of Lake Victoria among the Bantu Gusii and the Luhya and the Nilotic Luo on the eve of colonial rule.

Introduction

Communities in Nyanza and western Kenya situated to the east of Lake Victoria came from various directions to their present-day settlements. They include two linguistic families, the Bantu and the Nilotic. These communities came from different directions but interacted with each other and borrowed extensively from each other. The Abaluyia sub-groups which moved to western Kenya from eastern Uganda are likely to have been the earliest settlers in the lake region. According to Ochieng' (1974: 9), it could be inferred that the Abaluyia and Gusii people represent the spearhead of migration in this region. Similarly the Luo from the Sudan traversed Uganda, which was the centre of their encounter with the Bantu. As they moved on, the interactions between them persisted right into their settlements in Nyanza and western Kenya. They continue to interact extensively in modern western Kenya. But each group has a history that should be detailed because as these people groups interacted with each other they did it as smaller entities, for instance as clans and their immediate neighbours. It was occasional that several clans combined to fight the Bantu or other neighbours.

The earliest Bantu families into western Kenya seemed to have arrived before AD 500. The first arrivals went through Buganda either from Bunyoro, Katanga or from both. They split into two and one group went through Busoga to Ibanda while the other settled in the Sese Islands before moving to mainland Nyanza (Kuja and Sio Rivers). The group from Busoga kept to the mainland, settled at Ibanda and trickled into the Valley of Malaba River. Some of them eventually went to Buluyia land and are today represented by clans such as Abakose and Abatere. Some of them eventually went southwards and occupied present-day Bunyala, Samia, Basonga and Yimbo. The migrants who settled in the general area of Busia and Siaya are no longer traceable and may possibly have been absorbed by the bigger groups. Most of the Bantu groups who came to Goye did not leave but settled and retained their identity, but others dispersed to Buluyia land with the approach of the Luo and other Bantu groups.

The Bantu of western Kenya comprise the Abaluyia, Abagusii and Abakuria. Bantu presence in western Kenya stretches back to the early Iron Age. The Gusii and Luyia of Lake Victoria are the descendants of possibly the earliest Bantu groups to have arrived in Kenya, and are believed to have introduced iron smelting and the use of iron tools to the region. The period between 1500 and 1850 saw the migration of many Bantu clans and families from eastern Uganda into western Kenya and the emergence of the present-day Abaluyia, Abagusii, and Abakuria communities. Indeed, according to Were (1967a: 59), the Abaluyia community did emerge as a cultural community during this period. The formation of the Abaluyia entailed the fusion of the pre-1500 inhabitants of western province with those Bantu groups that arrived in the region in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. According to Ogot (1967: 485), the period between 1500 and 1800 marked the consolidation of this region. It was characterised by intense population growth leading to clearing new lands for agriculture. He further states that ethnic consciousness was also developing as they interacted with each other.¹ He further states that the period marked the beginning of oral traditions to enable them to recount their stories of origin despite the extensive interaction. Their concern was not about ethnic purity but about their ability to accommodate and assimilate diverse population elements.

1. For Ogot, ethnicity simply put is the feeling of people as a social community with definite identities.

While the Bantu who lived to the north of Lake Victoria evolved into a single community (the Abaluyia), the Bantu to the south of Winam Gulf evolved into three distinct societies: the Abagusii, Abakuria and Abasuba. This development attributed to the expansion of the Kenya Luo, who lodged a linguistic and cultural wedge between the Abagusii and Abakuria and confined the Basuba to Rusinga and Ngodhe Islands at the entrance of Winam Gulf.

The various clans in the Luo locations of Kenya have diverse historical origins but have a dominant culture and a common language (Dholuo). The Luo came from the Sudan several centuries ago. According to historians, they came from the Upper Nile region or Bahr el-Ghazal in the Sudan.² Linguists also demonstrate the continuity in the use of the language (Blount & Curley 1970, Ehret 1973) and anthropologists have revealed resemblance in social institutions and cultural practices of the Luo in Western Kenya and the people of Southern Sudan. They stressed that segmentation has been the primary and characteristic process of group formation among the people of Sudan and Western Kenya. Both the Luo of Nyanza and Southern Sudan have maintained patrilineality as the prime mode of recruitment into groups (Evans-Pritchard 1949, Southall 1961). For linguistic reasons and its classification, the Luo belong to the river lake Nilotes because of their preference to move along the river sides in the course of their migration and finally they settled by the lake side.

These people groups to the east of Lake Victoria have made effort to retain ethnic markers despite their interactions. The continued significance of their identities is ideally captured by Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo (1989) in the Luo proverb "*Kalang'o ok kunie kuon*" ("One cannot be coy or choosy when a *lang'o* shows good will or gesture") indicating the levels of interaction. They emphasise the significance of favourable response to such a gesture. It possible that in the early migration good responses enabled the stranger to be accommodated in shared spaces among the *Lang'o* or a stranger community, which was evident in the western Kenya settlements. If the Luo for instance rejected the offer, the *Lang'o* will simply withdraw it to one's disadvantage. The acceptance of the shared space could later lead to recognition of the new arrival as a brother (Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo 1987). This acceptance by the group could culminate in the breaking of boundaries to include an individual or group until they become as accepted as full member of that group. They give the example of the Omolo group among the Luo, which was initially considered *Lang'o* but later brought into the fold of Dholuo speaking group due to their acceptance of the Luo offer. This applies to the population movement that eventually created the societies in to the east of Lake Victoria, Kenya, in other words the way a group of strangers interacted with the new found group determined the collapse of or the building of boundaries. The collapse of such relations could lead either to war or to flight and this also happened to the east of Lake Victoria. However, whether in settlement, flight or war, each group tried to maintain their identity. The core concern of this paper is to examine the movement, settlement and the construction of society to the east of Lake Victoria among the Bantu Gusii and the Luyia and the Nilotic Luo on the eve of colonial rule. The map that is appended below clearly shows the area occupied by these people groups this region Gusii, Luyia and Luo in modern day Kenya. In colonial times, this area was all referred to as Nyanza, comprising North, Central and South Nyanza or Kavirondo districts. Many name changes occurred after Kenya became an independent nations, and today it is split into counties, namely Migori, Kisii, Nyamira, Homabay, Kisumu, Siaya, Kakamega, Bungoma, and Busia.

2. Ogot (1967) deals mainly with the migration of the Luo. A good summary of the Luo migration can be found in Were & Wilson (1968: 64–5, 309–10), and Ogot & Kieran (1968: 142–57).

Map 1. Nyanza Province Counties in Kenyan Context
Credits: Mildred A.J. Ndeda.

Migration and settlement

One major Bantu migrant group that arrived to the east of Lake Victoria in the sixteenth century and settled in Nyanza was the Gusii. Today they are settled on the fertile western sections of the Kenya highlands. It is the second largest cultural community in Nyanza. There are several versions of the origins of the Gusii. The Abagusii originally migrated into Nyanza from a homeland they identify as “Misri” (to the north of Mount Elgon or a place beyond the northern borders of Uganda) at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Here they lived as hunters and gatherers, but they also cultivated crops such as millet and rice, kept herds of cattle, sheep and goats. The population expanded leading to internal feuds culminating in dispersals. They were part of the Bantu on Mount Elgon, which included the Ganda, Soga and others. The Gusii trace their ancestry back to one ancestor called Mogusii son of Osogo (Aberi 2009). They divide themselves into eight different “tribes” representing Mogusii’s descendants (Ochieng’ 1986). Afterwards the Gusii migrated southwards following the course of the Nzoia River and arrived at the northern part of Lake Victoria at around between AD 1500 and 1560 (Aberi 2009). They wandered on the shores until they reached the foot of Ramogi Hills. Here they met a

number of settled Bantu speakers who were fishermen and cultivators of millet, bananas and root crops. They also kept cattle and sheep. It is within this area that the first wave of Luo into western Kenya found them (Ochieng' 1974b: 13).

Originally a cattle keeping community, Gusii economic and social institutions underwent fundamental transformation in the period between 1520 and 1755 as they established themselves in the lake region. Their first settlement in Nyanza was Yimbo at the head of Goye Bay where they remained for two generations and possibly their eponymous founders Mogusi and Mulogoli were born. It was here that the first wave of Luo migrants into west Kenya came into contact with the Gusii for the first time (Ochieng' 1974b: 13). While at Yimbo, the Gusii are said to have lived as fishermen before fleeing the Nilotes to their present homeland (Kisii highlands). With the influx of the cattle-keeping Luo into Yimbo area, the Gusii fled as they could not withstand pressure from the Luo. The pressure was generated by the Luo demand for more grazing area (Aberi 2009). Apart from this, the area between Goye Bay and present Nagoba in Bunyala was becoming crowded as various Bantu were arriving from eastern Uganda (Ochieng' 1974b: 15).

After a period of hostility, and with further arrival of more Luo people, the Gusii and the Logoli were forced to migrate to the area of present-day Kisumu Location in Kisumu County. These were moving as individual Gusii and Logoli families or as groups. They left through Alego Gangu to Kisumu where they made a large settlement. It was here, according to Gusii traditions, that the group divided into two, due to famine, one wing moving northwards to become the Logoli, and the remaining group migrating southwards into Kano plains, to become the Gusii. They settled here between 1620 and 1755. This was followed by what Ochieng' calls the evolution of the Gusii society from about 1600 to 1760. During the second phase of Gusii migration, they moved southwards in search of fertile land and landed on the Kano plains at the lakeside from Dunga to Nduru and spread into the interior along streams and rivers. Their furthest settlement was at Kibigori. They were few and lived in scattered villages. They had family units comprising a man, wife and children. They built simple mud grass thatched houses (Ochieng' 1974b: 15). The plains were ideal for fishing and rearing large herds of livestock. They had little contact with each other except in emergency. Their settlements were influenced by the lakes, streams and rivers. The pattern of their settlement would support the fact that part from being cultivators of finger millet and sorghum they were also expert fishermen. The Gusii, it is stated, lived on the Kano plains for a very long time, the period spanning 1644–1755 (Aberi 2009). From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the arrival and settlement by the Gusii in Yimbo and Kano plains was not a bed of roses (Ochieng' 1972).

Here they lived for over a century in scattered homesteads over the plains, and it was in Kano that the clan structure of the present-day Gusii began to take shape, in the form of four large families headed by warriors who led the migration south, and which became the Basi (zebra), Mugirango (leopard), Sweta and Wanjare (hippopotamus) totemic clans.³ It was this period that the Abagusii developed most of their social institutions such as sectional totems and clan sub-national structures. It was also in the lake region that the Abagusii seems to have acquired and perfected skills of iron technology. With better iron weapons, the Abagusii were able to expand at the expense of the Kalenjin, Sirikwa, Dorobo, and Maasai into areas of present-day Kericho and Gusii highlands between 1755

3. Aberi (2009) notes that as Gusii moved from Kano plains, they were already divided into their various totemic clans including the Kitutu, *Mugisero*, *Majoge* (ape).

and 1850. This expansion into the highlands from the lowland plains around Lake Victoria necessitated a change in their economy and society.

Originally pastoralists who undertook little cultivation and fishing in Lake Victoria, the Abagusii as they entered into the south-western highlands of Kenya began to develop an economy based largely on cultivation, although those who later occupied the lower territories of South Mugirango, Wanjare and western Kitutu retained their earlier concern with cattle. Abagusii traditions are silent on earlier occupants of the Gusii highlands, although from archaeological and linguistic studies it has been established that some people were living there.

Between 1750 and 1850, the Gusii experienced hardships. They were driven from the Kano plains by the Luo who migrated from Siaya and another group who were migrating from South Nyanza into Kano plains (see Ochieng 1986, Aberi 2009). Not all Gusii left the Plains: some remained, particularly those who had moved further away from the lake like the forbears of modern Sidho clan in Kano. These migrating Luo groups pushed the Gusii to Kabianga in the present Kericho County, where they again settled for many years. The Gusii found Kabianga to be wet and cold throughout the year. Their plants like millet and pumpkins could not do well, so they were forced to deemphasized several varieties of sorghum and other lowland crops and to expand the production of finger millet and root crops that did well in that environment (Ochieng' & Maxon 1992). Many of their animals died and because their crops had failed, famine broke out which killed many of them. They thus named this place Kabianga, meaning "nothing could survive in this place." In addition, the Kipsigis constantly attacked them forcing them further south into Maasai land. This was the period between 1789 and 1809.

The Maasai also repeatedly attacked the Gusii, leaving them in a confused and broken state. The Kitutu, Nyaribari and Mugirango groups who had settled at the present Kisii town were forced out by the Maasai to Manga escarpment. The Majoge, Bassi and a section of Mugirango escaped to Nyakige in Maasai land and later to Esuguta ya Muunde, then to Luo of Kabwoch. Others mixed groups of Bassi, Sweta and Girango, Nchari seem to have escaped to Suba land in Migori area, as Nchari moved north-westwards and took refuge in Nyakoe forest, in Wanjare location of the present Kisii County (Aberi 2009).

Upon settling in their present locality, the Gusii found them sandwiched between the Maasai, Kipsigis and the Luo. These three ethnic communities posed major threats to the survival of the Gusii, due to their regular attacks to raid cattle. In 1892, for example, there was a fierce battle that pitted the Kipsigis and virtually all the Gusii clans (Silberschmidt 1999). There could have been many battles between the Gusii and the Kipsigis because some oral sources seemed to intimate a war in 1881 in which the Kipsigis were subdued and many killed to the extent that the waters of border river water turned red, due to the many bodies that were thrown there.⁴ Due to fear of retaliation, the Gusii moved to Banchari, Bogirango as others remained at Nyagetubo and the rest moved upwards (Nyaribari, Getutu, and Bassi). Between 1786 and 1809 Gusii homesteads spread between present-day Sotik and Ikorongo in Maasai land.⁵ By the establishment of colonial administration the Gusii people were already settled in the Gusii highlands. They had fertile soil and adequate rainfall suitable for agriculture. On the basis of differences in altitude, rainfall,

4. This information was obtained from an interview with Evanson Chweya Nyambane, O.I., 4th April 2016.

5. In Ochieng' (1974b: 37), a detailed story is given regarding settlement of Gusii clans.

soil and to some extent, vegetation, it is possible to divide the Gusii highlands into two zones. The Gusii refer to the two zones as *Masaba* and *Chache*.⁶

Gusii society at the end of the nineteenth century consisted of a number of corporate clans or sub-tribes. A sub-tribe denoted a group of clans which recognized and accepted an affinity that marked them off from other sub-tribes as separate entities. The clans inhabiting the Masaba region were the Kitutu, Mukseru, Nyaribari, and North Mugirango. Those who lived in the Chache region included the Bassi, Majoge, south Mugirango and Wanjare (Maxon 1989). The occupation of Gusii highlands by these groups appears to have been a development which occurred in the last half of the nineteenth century (Ochieng' 1974b).

Maxon (1989: 7) has observed that the *"eight sub-tribes that came to make up the Gusii people did not, despite belief in a common ancestor, Mogusii, and the existence of a common language, customs, and social system, have any centralized political institutions in the period prior to British administration. Political integration was seldom at the level of the whole people; more often than not, it was at the level of the clan."* United political action by the entire Gusii sub-tribe was not usual either. The most common occasion for united action was for defence against other Gusii sub-tribes or clans or non-Gusii neighbors.

For disputes involving more people and a larger area, normally an entire clan, another group of elders played a role in finding a solution. These elders were called *egesaku* and they usually sat as a council to settle disputes (Maxon 1989). *Egesaku* was headed by an Omokumi o omugambi (a chief). Gusii clan chiefs played both judicial and religious functions and responsibilities. They were hereditary chiefs who were looked upon by the clan as the living representatives of the clan's ancestors. They took leading roles in religious sacrifices and such social activities as planting and harvesting crops. Thus, it has been observed that it was difficult to separate the religious and the ceremonial from the political life of the Gusii people (Ochieng' 1974b). Though the clan chief was also the political head of his clan, he was not automatically all-powerful figure. His influence was only confined to a single clan and his status was more that of first among equals than that of a powerful chief ruling a highly structured centralized political unit. With the exception of Kitutu clan, none of the Gusii sub-tribes was united under the rule of a single chief (Maxon 1989: 7).

The Abagusii lived in clusters of related clans within clearly delineated clan villages (Silberschmidt 1999). Clans and lineages played a politically significant role by providing a framework for territorial organization. This territorial organization contributed towards harmonious co-existence among clans but this not mean absence of inter-clan feuding.

The process of settlement was slow and fluctuating. It was spearheaded by a small group of pioneers who arrived and chose a ridge within which to settle (Maxon 1989). Consequently, land was occupied ridge by ridge by the pioneers whose relatives kept arriving over time. Settlement on fresh ridges was often based on a clan or sub-clan basis and each ridge came to be occupied by related people. Moreover, the occupation of the Gusii highlands was characterized by scrambling and internal squabbling over land and the control of the various hills and ridges of Gusii land.

6. The latter area, which forms the southwestern part of Gusiiland, is lower, ranging from 4,500 to 5,500 feet in elevation. It is also drier since rainfall does not usually exceed 60 inches per year. Masaba, the northeastern part of the Gusii highlands, ranges in elevation from 5,500 to 7,700 feet, and it has a relatively higher rainfall of from 60 to 110 inches per year.

The conflict experienced by the new settlers was not merely just an indicator of the slow, intermittent nature of the settlement in the highlands but also reflection a very important change which was taking place in the Gusii way of life. Before settlement in the highlands, they were largely a pastoral people but the new settlement changed their disposition towards cultivation, which would make agriculture the basis of the Gusii economy. The cool, wet highlands were not suited for raising of large herds of cattle (Ochieng' 1974b, 1974a). Thus, the ecological zone in which the Gusii settled in made them to slowly and gradually begin to adopt an agricultural way of life, away from pastoralism.

Akama convincingly argues that the Gusii evolved and have managed to remain a relatively distinct Bantu community in spite of the fact that they interacted with different ecologies and predominantly Nilotic neighbours. They have borrowed many of these people's ways of life, including language, crops, cuisine and other habits, but managed to retain as much of their own culture during the long and complex process of interactions characterised by cooperation (through trade and intermarriage), conflict, accommodation and change. Today many Gusii trace their origins among the Luo, Maasai and Kalenjin as much as individuals in these communities claim Gusii ancestry (Akama 2017).

As already indicated, the Gusii, and Luyia who traversed Lake Victoria are the descendants of possibly the earliest Bantu groups to have arrived in Kenya, and are believed to have introduced iron smelting and the use of iron tools to the region. The Abaluyia belong to the Niger-Congo Bantu-speaking linguistic group. They are mainly found in western Kenya north of Lake Victoria, where they form the largest concentration in Western Province (Bradley 1995: 203). The Kisii are considered to be closely related to the Luyia, and more specifically, to the Nyole and Maragoli, having split from them approximately 600 years ago. According to Were (1967a: 59), these originated from the south end of the Lake Victoria. The Kisii are geographically separated from the Luyia by the Kano plains, and the Nandi escarpment and their settlement is in southwestern part of Kenya. The relationship between the Luyia and the Kisii is deduced from their connected oral history as well as linguistic similarities. The languages are still almost mutually intelligible even though the two groups have lived in locales hundreds of kilometres apart for several centuries.

Whereas anthropologists believe that the ancestors of the Luyia were part of the great Bantu expansion out of western-central Africa around AD 1000, the Luyia history records that they migrated into what is now Kenya, from North Africa in a kingdom they call Misri. Today Misri is Egypt. Most migration accounts in Luyia traditions indicate that the ancestors of the various sub-groups originated from Misri. Were (1967a) has inferred that Misri could have been located in the Upper Nile region of Karamoja or around the Lake Turkana area. It was from here that the various Luyia clans migrated southwards into the highland regions north and east of Lake Victoria where they settled. Most journeyed into eastern Uganda from where they moved into their present locations between 1598 and 1733. Were further asserts that all Abaluyia sub-ethnic groups and clans came from interlacustrine area of Uganda from where they travelled eastwards along the northern shores of Lake Victoria to their present areas. Immigrants into present-day Luyia land trace their ancestry with several Bantu groups, such as the Tutsi and to other Nilotic peoples like the Kalenjin, Luo, and Maasai. Whereas natural factors (especially drought) accounts for their initial migration from their ancestral homeland of Misri, their second and largest wave of migration from eastern Uganda was caused by dynastic and domestic

disputes, overcrowding, and the quest for more land for cultivation (Were 1967a: 59). By 1850, migration into Luyia land was largely complete, and only minor internal movements occurred after that due to disease, droughts, domestic conflicts and the effects of British colonialism.

The early history of the Luyha is very complex because there were great ethnic differences among the early settlers. The Abuluyia are a hybrid community founded by people of varied origins and cultures. They came from all directions to settle in Buluyia (Were 1968: 190). Some southern areas such as Marama, Kisa and Idakho were occupied by earlier Bantu-speaking communities. The northern half, however, was first occupied by settlers of Kalenjin origin. The earliest immigrants arrived between about the second half of the fifteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century. By the latter period, immigrants of Kalenjin origin were already living round Mount Elgon. They later spread south and adopted Bantu culture and language. Their descendants became the Tachoni of Ndivisi and North Kabras, the Shieni of Marama, and the Nashieni, Tobe and Mulembwa of Wanga. The Mount Elgon Kalenjin, who retained their language and culture, are the Bongomek, Bok and the Kony. These occupied the northern Buluyia. The south was yet to be occupied (Were 1967a: 59).

About 1598 and 1733 there was large scale migration from the Bantu areas of eastern Uganda and Buganda the ancestors of the majority of present-day localities such as Tiriki, Wanga, Bukhayo, Samia, Marama, Bunyore, parts of Kabras, Busotso, Maragoli and Marachi who arrived about this time (Were 1968: 190). During the period 1580 to 1650, the locations of the Tiriki, Marachi, Bukhayo, Wanga, Maragoli, Samia, Marama and Bunyore were occupied by most of their present-day inhabitants. They moved up from Bantu areas of neighbouring eastern Uganda. Tradition suggests that they originally came from "Misri" (Egypt) but there is no other evidence to support this. Between 1652 and 1679 the migration from southern Busoga, southern Bugisu, and Bunyole and Bugwere was complete. Some settled in Central Nyanza from where they moved north at the appearance of the Luo. This migration was probably due to a desire for more land and tsetse flies. Some migrants moved straight into Buluyia, while others went south to the lake region. When the Luo came, they pushed them further north and south.

Between 1580 and 1650 and about the first half of the seventeenth century, immigrants of Maasai origin arrived. They settled in modern Idakho and were accepted peacefully. Later they spread to other areas. Their descendants are ruling Shimuli clan of Idakho, the Muli of Bunyore, and the Shisa, Mani and Khobole clans of Kisa. A separate group of Maasai immigrants later became the ruling clan of the Nyala of Navakholo (Were 1968).

Apart from settlers from eastern Uganda, the Maasai and those of Kalenjin origin, there were others from western Uganda and several clans of the Luo origin. The last large scale immigration from eastern Uganda took place between 1760 and 1841. According to Wekesa (2000: 36), eastern Uganda was merely a corridor through which most Luyia groups passed. The Teso expanded into the Tororo and Mbale areas between about 1706 and 1787. By about 1841, they expanded to Embayi and Amukura. Until then these areas were occupied by the Gisu and their cousins, the Bukusu. There were various groups scattered all over western Kenya between 1706 and 1787 like the Samia, Marachi, Bukhayo, Isukha and Buholo. The Teso invasion split the united Gisu. Some moved north into modern Bugisu, others moved east into western Kenya, forming the Bukusu. The ancestors of the Nyala of Navakholo were forced by the Teso to emigrate from Buyemnba to Busia and then to their present-day settlements in Bunyala.

The oral stories of most of the Luyia sub-groups also have versions of origin, movement and settlement. The Tiriki people claim that their ancestors came from the western area of Uganda and first settled near Kavirondo Gulf on Lake Victoria. At one time they were closely associated with the Wanga (Mumias) people. Folklore indicates that once the two groups lived together then at a later period they moved eastwards into the hill country where they now live. The Maragoli have a tradition that their ancestors under the leadership of Mulogoli (Mulagoki) came from northward by boat from Lake Tanganyika along the shore of Lake Victoria and settled in the vicinity of Maseno, northwest Kisumu. Apparently this migration took place 300-400 years ago. Later the migration of the Luo southward pushed the Maragoli back into the hills where they now reside. The Kakalelwa clans migrated to their present location in north Nyanza only a few generations ago. For several years they lived among the Wanga under chief Lutomia. Tradition connects to Isukha and Idakho communities with the Wanga people. The Kabras came from western Uganda not many generations ago, they are related to Tachoni with whom they frequently intermarry (Were 1967a, 1967b).

However, some of the Kabras clans came from Nandi origin. The Bukusu people trace their origin to northwestern Uganda. They first moved eastwards, they settled in Mbale Uganda and then later moved south to their present location. At the time of migration, the area around Kitoshi (Lugulu) was virtually uninhabited, except for a few so-called Elgon Masai. Tradition of the Tachoni indicates that they came from the western part of Uganda. They were first located twenty miles west of their present holdings, but were driven eastwards by the Teso and Wanga tribes. At present, they are neighbours to the Bukusu and maintain marriage relations with them (Wekesa 2000: 36). According to Wanga traditions, their ancestors came from West Africa and settled in the Lake Albert region of Uganda. From there they moved southward to the present location of the Kavirondo Gulf of the Lake Victoria.

By 1850, migration into Luyia land was largely complete, and after 1850 only small internal movements took place, probably caused by famine, epidemics, family quarrels, drought, and the desire for better land. In time intermarriage, trade contacts, and specialized skills, such as war medicine, rain medicine and circumcision, formed the present Abaluyia community into a single cultural and linguistic unit. Because so many had originally come from the Bantu parts of eastern Uganda, a similar Bantu culture grew in Buluyia. Moreover, because the immigrants came with different languages and cultures, it is possible to account for the varieties of dialect and culture found in Buluyia today (Were 1968).

While they retained most of their original practices such as farming as they migrated, the Abaluyia adopted some cultural practices from other communities they encountered in their final area of destination in the Lake Victoria region. For example, following centuries of interaction with the Nilotic groups such as the Nandi and the Maasai, the Luyia came to practice male circumcision, a rite of passage that is still observed by most of the sub-ethnic groups, but in a most passionate way by the Ababukusu, Abatachoni, Abakabras, and Abatirichi. Inversely, these Nilotic communities also became "bantuised" by the new Luyia migrants from whom they acquired new linguistic terms. These intercultural interactions increased with the settlement, in the first quarter of the sixteenth and the middle of the seventeenth century, of some Maasai clans in the northern Luyia area occupied by the Abatachoni and Abakabras. Further south, close to Lake Victoria,

the arrival of the Luo during the last half of the sixteenth and the first quarter of the seventeenth century not only led to the displacement of some Luyia who had settled here, but also to some members of the later, such as the Abasamia, Abawanga, and Abamarachi, who adopted Luo language and customs (Were 1968).

Religion played an essential role in the day-to-day life of the Luyia peoples. Ancestor worship was common but *Were* was regarded as the supreme deity. Belief in life after death was a key component of this belief system, as were sacrifices performed by elders at the family level. Since such sacrifices involved animal and agricultural products, religion was thus intertwined with modes of production. The Luyia have always been farmers and land is regarded with greatest economic and social significance. In the pre-colonial times, land was communally-owned and put under the trust of the *liguru*, a clan elder. Cattle were kept by individual households for social functions such as payment of dowry. Trade, mainly of the form of barter exchange, was common with the neighbouring Nilotic communities.

Politically, two types of government were discernible amongst the Luyia in the pre-colonial period. Clan-based government headed by elders was common amongst all the sub-ethnic groups except the Abawanga. The elders made political, economic, and social decisions in matters of warfare, legislation, and use of land. Most often, an influential, wise, and impartial elder was appointed by the clan elders to direct the affairs of the clan. The elder was variously referred to as *omwami*, *omukali*, *omukhulundu*, *omukasa*, or *weng'oma*. This position was highly untenable since an *omwami* could easily be deposed in case he turned unpopular. For some, security of office was guaranteed by the hereditary nature of that position. Amongst the Abawanga, however, a highly centralized government headed by the Nabongo (king) became the distinct point of difference in political organization with the rest of the Luyia sub-ethnic groups that utilized the clan-based government (Were 1968).

One of the key communities that traversed this region around the arrival of the Bantu were the Nilotic Luo. The migration of the Luo took effect between AD 1000 and 1500. The complete reason for their movement from their cradle land is not clear. A few factors, however, prompted their migratory patterns and these included the quest for greener pastures for their livestock and water, the constant internal conflicts within the Luo clans and family, external pressure from hostile neighbouring communities. Possibly these provoked the movement and in turn led to a southward migration of the Luo from their ancestral land. They were searching for a peaceful settlement and to avoid natural disasters such as unpredicted famine, long drought periods and diseases. The consequent outcome was the increase in the population of the Luo people which led to conflict over land between the clans and families, adventure and diseases. Migration was thus caused by a composite of factors (Herring 1979).

From the Sudan, the Luo moved through south and central Busoga in Uganda, the humid savannah and the dry grasslands of eastern Uganda to the higher areas of Kakamega District and finally into the lower and drier areas near Lake Victoria (Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo 1989: 18). Their migration into Kenya was in three waves emerging from eastern Uganda. The Joka-Jok was the first group on the arrival calendar with Acholi land as their point of origin. Their migratory pattern is said to be the largest one to be recorded. They were the first to settle in Ligala in Samia, where they sojourned for about three generations. They were also the first to move into Kenya and their migration took

place between 1500 and 1550. The Joka-Jok comprised of Alego, Seje and Nyinek clans. From Ligala those people spread to Got Ramogi in Yimbo and to Alego. At a later stage, after several disagreements, the Jokachwanya (a sub-group) moved to South Nyanza and the others went to occupy Asembo, Gem and Sakwa (Ochieng' 1974b: 23–5). With the arrival of new occupants in the eighteenth century in Uyoma some of the Joka-Jok were forced to flee to Seme, Nyakach and even to South Nyanza and Tanzania.

The next major groups were the amorphous clusters called Owiny and Omolo. The traditions of the Owiny groups indicated a strong association with the people of northwestern Uganda and the northern margins of Bunyoro (dominated by agricultural communities). From northern Uganda, the Luo ancestors travelled along the western flanks of Mount Elgon, passed through Mbale and Tororo and eventually settled for some time in Budama. They moved and settled in Busoga for some generations before they arrived in western Kenya. After moving across Samia, where some of them remained, they finally settled in Alego. These were the ancestors of the Kadimo, Kowil, Wanyenjra in Yimbo; Kogelo, Karuoth, Karapul, Kanyabol and Agoro found in Alego, the Kanyakwar in Kisumu and the Kamot and Konya in Kano today (Ochieng' 1974b: 26–7). The Jok-Owiny moved from Pubungu and settled temporarily in Budama before finally settling in Sigoma alego in the Nyanza region of western Kenya.

Between 1540 and 1600 the Omolo group settled at Ibanda for three generations before moving to western Kenya. Sections of the Omolo were left in Teso and also among the Padhola of Uganda (Ogot 2009: 649). The Omolo group seemed to have come from a distinctively different region from the Owiny group. They had strikingly different attitude towards cattle, land settlement, power and social relations. They also came much later. The Omolo group appears to have come from the Alur and might have arrived in Nyanza before AD 1600. From Pawir (Chope) in northern Bunyoro-Kitara, they came to Ibanda in Bokoli County of Busoga and settled for some time before they moved to Samia and Bukedi. From Samia they moved to Yimbo and finally to West Alego. From about 1700 to the second half of the nineteenth century part of the Komolo group lived in mad wall villages, looking after cattle and practicing a limited form of agriculture (Ogot 2009: 518). This marked the beginning of sedentary life and change from a largely pastoral life to mixed farming with increased emphasis on agriculture. It is here they developed their identity. Due to the pressure exerted on them by other in-coming Luo groups, some of the Jok-Omolo moved to the area now called Gem in Siaya County. Others drifted southwards to Uyoma. When the area became crowded some of them crossed the lake and settled in South Nyanza (Ogot 2009: 27–8). The Omolo group was composed primarily of the Jok-Adet (Gem), Joka-Nyada, Jok-Ochia (South Nyanza) and Jo-Unami (Samia).

Ogot states that the story of Luo settlement was not a united, planned and executed consciously and deliberately. The whole operation was diversified, irregular and unorganised. Each group acted independently or often against each other. The process of occupation was slow (Ogot 2009: 497). They did not destroy their Bantu neighbours but either drove them out, subjugated them or absorbed them. The Luo population expanded rapidly, leading to further migration, encounters and assimilation.⁷

When the people arrived in western Kenya, their initial settlements, Ligala, were normally fortified. These are what Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo (1989: 14) refer to as *Gunda Bur*. As the population of the initial settlement expanded, it became necessary for the

7. Details of the expansion and settlement are adequately captured by Ogot (2009).

children of *Gunda* to establish *dala* (homestead) outside the *Gunda Bur*. The expanding local community was referred to as *Gweng'* (locality) which did not necessarily comprise of agnatic kinsmen but was largely based on the formation of alliances developed for strategic reasons. Several *gwenge* was a means of ensuring lack of isolation because survival in the hostile world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries depended on securing support and labour through incorporation and creation of alliances. Distant contacts were also necessary (e.g. Luo-Samia links). Alliance enhanced the reception of migrants into new areas.

Alliances were important because the Luo did not migrate into empty areas. They found people of Bantu origin already settled. These Bantu-speakers were good farmers and led a sedentary life. They cultivated grain, rice and bananas. They used iron hoes and spears and made pottery for cooking and water storage. They had large herds of cattle, goats and sheep but they laid more emphasis on their crops than their animals. Before the arrival of the Luo, the Bantu speakers had major settlements in Yimbo and Samia (Ochieng' 1979: 2-3).

Ogot (1967) states that the initial entry of the Luo was peaceful and they settled in areas adjacent to and probably suitable for use by the farmers in the area. As more waves arrived the Luo were forced to be more aggressive, given that the original settlers hated to lose their land. The Bantu groups were forced to abandon the lakeshore and the plains and moved to the higher and safer areas due to Luo invasion (e.g. Gusii). The Bantus moved north and south in search of new sites. In most cases, however, the Bantu families, which opted for peaceful co-existence, were assimilated. They became Luo because there is no trace of their languages and culture. The numerous clashes between the Luo and the Bantu did not interfere with cultural exchanges or intermarriages between them. The Luo language prevailed and became the language those absorbed.

It can be inferred from what has been discussed that the various Luo clans that make up the Luo locations have diverse origins. However, by 1900 a dominant culture and language (Dholuo) had evolved among the diverse people living in this area. The Luo movement seemed fascinating because of the style of movement. It would begin with a single group followed by a neighbourhood group and then a whole band of people infiltrated the areas already occupied by the Bantu and the Cushite. Through research into the myths and legends of the Luo people, Ogot (1967) was able to trace back the routes of migration using the approximation of generations. It is likely that the climate and ecology of the routes they followed influenced the actual lines of movement. In the same way the attitudes of the Bantu and the Cushite whose territory was on their way also contributed.

The Luo migration had were political, social and economic ramifications for the localities they moved into. Their migration helped to shape the modern society by absorption of some groups. Their migratory patterns led to population growth in the East African region and possibly also led to the disintegration of some societies. Inter-clan struggles over land resulted in the emergence of securing final settlement in Nyanza Province (present-day Siaya, Kisumu, Homa bay and Migori counties). Their migration might have led to the introduced new crops like sorghum, groundnuts, and simsim as products of an economic activity and in some eastern parts of Uganda were also introduced to nomadic pastoralism. Their movement also bred new customs, language, and cultural practices. The invaded people were either absorbed or fled. The invasion of the Luo was a probable cause of insecurity in the areas they passed or occupied and there might have been great death tolls as outcomes in the wars fought by the Luo and other groups. Their interactions with these communities contributed to change. By the eighteenth century the Luo had spread

into most of central and south Nyanza. The Luo were intruders and had to fight to occupy. By 1850, the settlement of the people in the Central Nyanza was almost complete. The different clans had formed their economic organisation and developed normative systems, political constitution, mechanisms and agencies and other derived requirements, which affected all societies alike (Malinowski, as quoted in Anderson 1970: 10). In the map below an indication has been given on the areas that are currently occupied by the ethnic groups to the east of Lake Victoria.

Map 2. Lake Region Counties
Credits: Mildred A.J. Ndeda.

Socio-Economic Organisation

It is possible that in western Kenya there were small bands of hunter gatherers and the area was settled by Bantu speakers who practiced a mixed economy initially with an emphasis on cattle breeding. However, with the increase in population, loss of cattle through disease or raids or pressure from the expanding Luo by the second half of the nineteenth century agriculture was becoming a more important economic activity. The agricultural techniques had become more defined and advanced indicated by the notion of crop rotations and fallow periods. Different kinds of grains or different varieties of the same grain were sown together. Ash was used to fertilise the soil for cultivation. Ogot (1985: 14) states that nineteenth century economy of these people was able to produce surplus.

Among the Luo of Nyanza it is likely that there was a complete transformation in the food production system during the second half of the nineteenth century. This transformation could have contributed to significant change in the social and political organisation. In the Sudan their systems were dual determined by the environmental conditions, which forced them to disperse to the hills during the floods and move to the permanent rivers in the dry season. During the wet seasons the family was controlled by the household head, but in the dry season the leadership was held by the prominent families (Ogot 1985: 15). The political system therefore remained rudimentary.

The Luo had closely linked economic and social systems that continued to evolve as they moved. It was difficult to separate one from the other. The Luo had homesteads, which housed several families often connected by kinship. The homestead formed the primary religious, social and economic unit. Each elementary family consisted of the father, his wife/wives, unmarried children, married sons, and sometimes servants (*wasumbini*). In some homesteads the head of the home (*won dala*) could invite his brothers and cousins to stay with him. The size of the Luo family depended on the number of wives a husband had. In certain cases the wealth of an individual could also swell the size of his family (Ogot 1975). Polygamy was a desirable index of a man's worth and an indication of a man's wealth and enhanced his economic and political status. For a woman, however it was characterised by competition with co-wives.

In the polygamous homestead, the husband was the head of many households (*udi*). For effective management of such a household he built his own house (*abila*) at the centre. Co-wives lived in separate houses, placed along the village fence according to their seniority in marriage (Ochola-Ayayo 1980: 34). Each wife's house had two hearths; most of the cooking was done on the veranda. The head of homestead had his hearth in his *abila* where he entertained the visitors and instructed his sons. Where there were many men in the homestead, they often gathered at his hearth in the evenings to gossip over the events of the day and plans for the future (Ogot 1975: 22, Ogot 1967).

In a polygamous home, each co-wife was *wuon ot*, meaning that she was the head of the household and the leader of its domestic and economic activities. She controlled her children among whom she planted the concept of collective ownership and antagonism against the other household. Wives also became rivals in the possession of property and competition for the household favour (Ogot 1975: 19). This rivalry (*nyiego*) was practised to promote self-pride and unity. The children of one woman were united against another although this was not very obvious to a stranger (Othieno-Ochieng' 1968: 29). Each household (*ot*) was responsible for the maintenance and needs of its members, including production, deployment and use of labour power and the determination of economic

objectives (i.e., what to produce, how to go about it, etc.) People did cooperate at a high level (lineage-co-operative work—*saga*) but the basic aims of the household were kept paramount.

The major part of Luo production system was, of course, geared to food production. Their multi-faceted food economy included agriculture, pastoralism, and fishing, hunting and gathering. Before and during the nineteenth century, the Luo clans that had arrived in Nyanza were mainly nomadic pastoralists. They kept large herds of cattle but practised minimal agriculture. Due to numerous natural calamities, which affected their cattle, they were forced to change the balance between pastoralism and agriculture. By the arrival of the British, the first sector of food production was agriculture (Schiller 1982: 33). The late nineteenth century was a dynamic period for the Luo economy with new options in agriculture, hunting and trade (Hay 1975: 93). Some of the former economic options were cut off by the rinderpest epidemic. There were three major changes, namely the shifting balance between pastoralism and agriculture, changes in crop technology and growth of markets and trade networks (Hay 1975: 95). Many occurrences in the 1880s and 1890s combined to decrease the relative importance of pastoralism within the overall economy of the Luo.

In some areas in the late nineteenth century land was available and also game. Land was plentiful so people could move from one homestead to the next. There was also a chance for some land to lie fallow. Land was productive and there were good harvests. They planted potatoes, which did very well (Hay 1975: 95). The main crops in late nineteenth century were sorghum—the red and white varieties. Sorghum was important as part of the meals and for beer and entertainment. According to Hay (1976), sorghum held a predominant position in the agricultural system of the Luo in the 1890s. They also had finger millet, which was not used for food but for beer. They also had crops such as barley (*dongo*), sesame (*nyim*), pumpkins (*budho*), small red beans (*ngor*), green grams and small ears of maize could have been a later nineteenth century introduction because she states that when Lord Lugard visited Nyanza in 1890 he saw little or no maize (Hay 1976: 96). Those who travelled to Uganda had seen maize in central Buganda and Bunyoro by 1862 and Acholi in 1880. It is possible that maize might have travelled along the trade routes from Buganda and Bunyoro to Mumias and spread into central Nyanza during the 1870s and 1880s. Millet and sorghum were ideally the foods for the Nilotes. These were very suitable for the hot dry climate and able to withstand higher temperatures and be dormant in periods of drought. Ogot estimates that the *durra*—a variety of sorghum—was the staple food of the Nilotes as early as AD 1000 (Ogot 1967, Ogot & Kieran 1968).

The Luo grew several varieties of beans. Ehret (as cited by Ogot 2009: 649) has stated that haricot beans or *oganda* were of exotic origin and had spread from the coast by the Arabs/Swahili traders during the first half of the nineteenth century. The Luo also had sesame, vegetables and pulses. They also experimented with a variety of new crops. The nineteenth century list of foods did not include bananas or sweet potatoes. Since these were not planted in the lakeside areas for a long time, it means they had a minor place in the diet of the people and so could also have arrived here by trade. Perhaps they heard of these new crops from their neighbours. Langlands (1996: 96) admits that the banana came from the Ganda and Busoga lands. It spread to the rest of Uganda and parts of the modern day western Kenya and reached Mount Elgon only at the end of the nineteenth century. The Luyia could have learnt of the banana and passed it on to the Luo. Banana could also have reached Luoland through the islands of Rusinga and Mfangano, where the people

were familiar with the fried one from Buganda (Ogot 2009: 649). Most of the Luo speakers must have idolised pastoralism, which was significant as a media of exchange, standards of value and stores of value. However, *Apamo*, the great rinderpest epidemic in 1880s and 1990s devastated cattle in Luoland. This led to immediate long-term adjustment in the balance between pastoralism and agriculture.

With the increasing emphasis on agriculture, clear practices of land ownership and division of labour had to occur. Men cleared the fields. As population increased, a land tenure system emerged out of the belief that every person had an inalienable right to a piece of farmland. Land was normally inherited through patrilineage but there were a few exceptions. Grandchildren had the right to inherit their grandfathers' farmland (*lop kwaro*). The sole survivor of *jakakwaro* would inherit all of the *lop kwaro*. Father's land (*lop wuoro*) was inherited by the sons. If there was only one son, then he inherited the whole *lop wuoro* (Wilson 1965: 11). Unmarried sons inherited the remaining portion of the mother's farm on her death. The farm, which a husband gave to his wife, was the inalienable property of her sons and it was only the sons who could pass them on to close agnatic kin or allocate them to *misumba* (slave), *jadak* (tenant at will) or *kimirwa* (born out of wedlock) or their own wives when they married. Hence, within this system, people acquired land and continue to through patrilineal inheritance.

As far as the division of labour was concerned, women and girls did the digging, planting, weeding and harvesting. The eldest wife was always the first to plant and later to harvest (Olag 1978: 61). Every Luo wife basically controlled the crops grown on her land so as to feed her household. She could also exchange grain for livestock and other varieties of foods or give some to needy relatives (Schiller 1982: 35). She was the one who processed her crops into food; cleaned and dried the beans; pounded and ground sorghum, millet and in later years processed cassava and maize.

In addition to the fields of his wife/wives, a man also had his private plot of land, called *mondo*, which was cultivated by himself or with the help of his wives. He could use the produce from his plot as he liked. Often some of the grain was exchanged for livestock. Some was also used for entertaining the elders (Schiller 1982: 36). The grain from the *mondo* garden was stored in the man's granary (*mondo*). When he died, the *mondo* went to his last wife (junior wife) and hence to her sons. If he had only one wife, the *mondo* went to the last-born (Ndeda 1991).

Another aspect of agriculture was its co-operative nature. If a woman needed help for farming, she could call upon her sisters and other relatives. This was known as the *saga* and was also used for carrying out other large co-operative projects. The *saga* system helped the household accomplish economic goals and at the same time reinforced political and social ties between a woman (and therefore her husband and his group) and her relatives as well as between the larger political groups. This was a practice in the entire space to the east of Lake Victoria.

Whereas agricultural production was largely the domain of women, the major economic occupation of Luo men and boys was the herding and protection of cattle and other livestock, like goats and sheep. Much of a man's time was also spent in land clearing, fishing (in certain areas), specialised crafts and exchange of grain and livestock. The Luo men and boys felt that their most important task was to keep their livestock safe and well. Such work required techniques in stock-raising, medicines to treat animal diseases, herding and building the village cattle kraal. Pastoral training in the pre-colonial era included military exercise due to the hazardous nature of the area (Ochola-Ayayo 1980: 38).

In the Luo society, cattle were the source of milk, blood and meat, which supplemented the Luo vegetable diet. The skin, urine, bones, tails of the animals and cow dung were used in the household or sometimes traded for grain to feed the family (Schiller 1982: 36). People who kept large herds of cattle commanded a lot of respect value of cattle was evident in transactions between landowners and tenants as well as payments, especially those related to kinship (Schiller 1982: 39).

Cattle played a significant role in the performances of sacrifices. Cattle, being part and parcel of social life, were given names of highly respected people in the community by the herd boys. Some were given the names of renowned wrestlers. Some were given women's praise names. Small animals were destined mainly for sacrifice (Ogutu 1975: 13). A man's cattle were sometimes taken along when he went to war. The sight of the precious possession was meant to give him additional courage. Cattle also accompanied mourners to funerals to help the people pay their last respects to the dead.

The original Luo economy changed considerably after the settlement in Nyanza. They became fishermen and cultivators (Ogutu 1975: 13-15). Some individuals specialised in various skills and regularly exchanged goods with other members of the community. These skills regarded as family secrets were often inherited (e.g. blacksmiths, leather workers, harpists, singers, basket makers, weavers, traditional doctors, roof thatchers, granary builders, makers of shields, potters and teeth extractors). Most of these services were exchanged locally often on request.

Other items of importance were obtained from other areas. In the late nineteenth century, there must have been well-developed trade system with definite market places and days. The markets were seasonal and famine-related. Women were active traders. They travelled long distances in search of food, especially during famine. Since wives came from different clans and lineages, they became the common trade links between these groups (Butterman 1979).

The division of labour within a typical homestead was based on both sex and age. Women, men, the young and the old played different roles though there was an overlap. Sometimes the males served as heads of homesteads and sometimes households, depending on the number of wives. In the area of decision-making, some exerted control over many aspects of household operations, while others tended to delegate authority to wives and sons. In small homesteads, the heads were often involved in many aspects of household operations. In larger homesteads, delegation of authority was easy. The men were also responsible for animal husbandry, clearing the fields, cultivation (sometimes), and building of houses, granaries, fences and homesteads (Ndeda 1991).

No matter how involved homesteads heads were in household operation, women were in control of the domestic economy. Production skills of women covered all domestic work, agricultural work and limited livestock care. Other responsibilities of women included basketry technology and also transportation and storage. Women carried out industries such as pottery and some types of basket weaving. According to Oswald (1915: 27, 38), with the exception that the tasks of carrying water, grinding millet, making millet beer, and cooking are confined to women, there was evidence of equality between the sexes with regard to their daily work. Men shared the burden of life fairly equally with the women. Men carried heavy burdens of papyrus stalks for building their rounded grass-roofed huts, as well as tree trunks and branches for fires and fences and they would even join the women in tilling the fields of millet.

The Gusii are divided into a large number of clans, sub-clans, lineages and households, each level being significant in a different sense (Mayer 1949). The clan (*eamate*) was the unit of exogamy and a defensive unit under major attack. It was divided into lineages (*amaiga*), which in turn were divided into another important unit of community organization, the *risaga* (Orvis 1989). *Risaga* was a section of the lineage living together and claiming the use of a set area of land and exchanged work for beer in communal labor processes. The *risaga* was also a prime unit of defence and herding, since its young men lived and herded together in cattle villages called *ebisirate*. Below the *risaga* was household which was headed by a patriarch or group of brother, who allocated land to women for them to produce food for their husbands and children (Mayer 1949).

Silberschmidt (1999) states that the head of the household, the husband, had access to as much land as his family could cultivate and use for grazing. Agriculture was combined with animal husbandry. Cattle herding, however, overshadowed agriculture by far—in social significance if not actually for subsistence. Men acquired large herds of cattle, and numbers were augmented through breeding and raids on neighbouring clans. Thus, cattle herding together with the protection of it went hand in hand and constituted an extremely important basis of both male activities and the male image, not to mention social value. Land was not scarce in pre-colonial era. As such, a man could move from his land and settle elsewhere where he deemed appropriate (Kenya National Archives).

According to Maxon (1989: 5), Gusii socio-economic organization before the establishment consisted of a number of territorially defined, related clans. The clan, according to Mayer (1949), was the central unit of Gusii social organization. Gusii clans were integrated with a number of surrounding clans in the units which have been termed sub-tribes (Bassi, Kitutu, Majoge, North and South Mugirango, Mukseru, Nyaribari, and Wanjare), each having a distinct territory associated with it. Moreover, each Gusii clan was normally sub-divided into sub-clans and finally into segmentary lineages; these too were associated with specific territory.

Among the Gusii, most families were polygamous, headed by a patriarch. But there were also monogamous family setups. Land was divided according to the family size which was not regulated hence a man could marry as many wives as his wealth allowed. As heads of households, men, in most cases, exercised control and authority over the rest of the family members. Silberschmidt (1999) noted that the family was a unit of social control with the head of the family was a source of authority.

Each wife was allocated land to cultivate by her husband (Kenya National Archives). This reduced confrontations, disputes and conflicts among wives over use of land and access to farm produce. In addition, each wife had her own granary. The wife and her children were supposed to be an agriculturally independent and self-supporting unit (Silberschmidt 1999, Were & Nyamwaya 1986). Men had exclusive rights over the control of land, property and cattle whether as household heads or village elders. The head of the family was responsible for apportioning land for the various women of the homestead to cultivate and cattle for the males to marry with and the settling of disputes and lawsuits (Kenya National Archives). Property inheritance was always on the male line (Kenya National Archives, Silberschmidt 1999). Women, then, were only essential to the lineage process as instruments of procreation. There was a hierarchy of power at the family level and it was for this reason that Silberchmidt (1999) observed that the precolonial Gusii society was heavily patriarchal. At the same time, Gusii norms and customs advantaged men in the society. In this regard, LeVine (1966, quoted in Silberschmidt 1999: 35) observes that

the homestead head was formerly the absolute ruler of this group and owner of all its property... The internal allocation of livestock and land was entirely in his hands, and he was also the principal performer of sacrifice to the ancestors.... no one within or outside the homestead could challenge his authority and the matter would wait until his death for the adjudication of other elders. He had the power of putting a curse on his adult sons, which would kill them or drive them mad unless rescinded after a public apology by the son. Everyone in the homestead was obliged to show difference to its head in their everyday behaviour... Each homestead wanted to have the most populous domestic group possible, with numerous sons as a potential fighting force.

Just before colonial establishment, the Gusii were moving towards greater emphasis on agriculture, but pastoral values continued to be of great importance (Maxon 1989). Although they normally kept sheep and goats as well, cattle herding tended to overshadow cultivation in social significance. Economic well-being and strength was thought of primarily in terms of the acquisition of large herds of cattle by breeding, raids on other Gusii clans and sub-tribes and neighbouring communities (mostly the Maasai, Luo and the Kipsigis). Cattle were also obtained through payment of dowry when daughters were married off (Silberschmidt 1999). Though less valued than cattle, sheep and goats had their significance in religious sacrifice and the entertainment of guests (LeVine & LeVine 1966).

Because of their significance in Gusii economic life, cattle were kept in highly fortified villages called *ebisirate* (Maxon 1989). Several families would keep their cattle in one cattle village, mostly during the night and other times when cattle were not grazing. Cattle villages were guarded by young, unmarried Gusii men. Other than guard cattle in *ebisirate*, young Gusii men also launched cattle raids.

As noted earlier, the Gusii also practiced crop farming before the advent of colonial rule. Cultivation of crops was largely undertaken for purposes of subsistence. Land in precolonial times was relatively abundant, and the predominant pattern of one of shifting cultivation with fields lying fallow after use in several growing seasons (Mayer 1950). Land was recognized as belonging to families and sub-clans rather than to individuals. In most parts of the Gusiiland, the population lived in scattered homesteads (Bogonko 1976).

The Gusii family was also the basic unit of labor with divisions by gender. Cattle herding was basically the responsibility of the young men, and work in the fields was normally the province of women and girls. Men usually carried out the heavier of clearing the fields, while women undertook most of the basic tasks of cultivation (LeVine & LeVine 1966). Neighbouring homesteads were also in the habit of pooling labour resources for certain purposes (Mayer 1950). The major crops cultivated by the Gusii in precolonial period were two varieties of millet called *wimbi* and *mtama*. Sweet potatoes, beans and bananas were the other crops of importance among the precolonial Gusii people.

Surplus agricultural products formed one of several types of economic exchange in precolonial Gusii society. Grain, cattle, and beer were used as mediums of exchange or means of payment (LeVine & LeVine 1966). Beer was exchanged for work while beer, grain and cattle were often given to specialists who could perform some unique services such as witch smeller (LeVine 1962a). The Gusii traded mainly with the Nilotic-speaking Luo who occupied the lower lying lakeshore areas to the west and north of Gusiiland. Gusii grain, hoes, and iron implements were normally bartered for pottery, livestock, fish, and salt (Ochieng' 1974). Sources of salt in Gusiiland were scarce and they heavily relied on trade to obtain it from the Luo (Maxon 1989). Areas inhabited by the Luo received less rainfall and they had to rely for grains from the Gusii.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the eight subgroups inhabiting the Gusii highlands were beginning to adapt themselves to a more predominantly agricultural economy. They had begun to clear forests, break the ground, and grow crops suited to the well-watered highlands area, and the produce served as a means of subsistence and trade as well (Maxon 1989).

In the region to the east of Lake Victoria, all communities were changing their economic arrangements due to the emergent environmental changes. The Abaluyia economic base in precolonial times and their whole range of economic activities were influenced by the environment in which they lived. The favourable physical environment in which they lived enabled them to develop a highly productive system in both farming and agriculture and animal husbandry. It was a subsistence economy and the activities involved were harmonised by a structural relations that existed between the political and the economic system.

Land formed the focus of social relations. As a major means of production, land in precolonial times was communally owned. It was a general observation that land belonged to the whole community and the community controlled its allocation and disposal. Individual members of the community may have had exclusive rights of land depending on the number of wives he had apportioned to them but such rights were restricted to the rights of access and use of that land. The communal land tenure system recognised that certain sections of land allocated to individuals were open for use by the entire community, for example the grazing fields, the uncleared forests. Members of the family and community could freely graze their cattle in individual fields. Members of family or clans thus used common grazing fields, salt licks and streams of water for animals.

Land also constituted an integral part of the political, social and economic life of the society so its organisation was vital. At the clan level a specific elder was in charge of land and determined the clans' access to land. Each clan and sub-clan had its portion of land. Once land was under cultivation, the clan had no control whatsoever. He had charge over uncultivated land but once land was under cultivation the clan leader had no control over it. Each man obtained land from the communal land depending on the number of wives he had. Kinship relations controlled the access of groups and individuals to the conditions of production and sources of production.

Within agriculture, the relative abundance of land during the nineteenth century seemed to have counteracted the tendency towards social differentiation. The Abuluyia evolved a complex system of land rights individual ownership of cultivated land, which could be inherited, and systems of tenancy, which authorised strangers to be granted limited tenure they paid no tribute for land and this limited their exploitation. To prevent differentiation they limited the use of cow dung in cultivation of crops. But the continued importance of cattle among the lakeside societies did permit economic and political differentiation. Cattle had great value as storable wealth, an asset which could grow with proper management, surplus product for both the Luo and Abaluyia. Among the Abaluyia it had led to manifest differentiation as observed by Thompson that there were "*poorer people who had no goods or cattle*" (as quoted by Ogot 1985: 17).

As noted by Ogotu (1979), western Kenya had high agricultural productive capacity. This was even noted by Sir Gerald Portal when he travelled to Uganda to investigate whether or not the British government should retain Uganda. He observed that "*every side of our immediate vicinity were fields of Indian corn, millet, beans of all kinds and sweet potatoes.*" Out of the abundance and cheap food supply he concluded that the people were industrious and skilful agriculturalists. He even identified the area as having the potential

to become the granary supplying large quantities of grain at minimal rates (Ogutu 1979: 217). Before 1895, F.D. Lugard concluded that there was enormous quality of flour brought in for sale in the markets and sold cheaply. For him this was an indication that in this locality they produced a very large surplus of food beyond the wants of the people. The area was well watered and had rich soils. It had the potential of producing more since there was a lot of empty space (Ogutu 1979: 216). The main crops that were grown included eleusine, sorghum, green grams, sesame, bananas, sweet potatoes, pumpkins. Some of these plants were of exotic origin given their contacts with neighbouring Uganda as well as with the Arabs who traversed this area before colonial rule. It is likely one of these was the banana. As stated by Langlands, the Ganda and Soga planted the banana for centuries and it spread through the rest of Uganda and western Kenya towards the end of the nineteenth century. They seem to have learned the planting of the banana from the Ganda and the Soga and passed this knowledge to the Luo neighbours (Hay 1975: 97).

There was clear division of labour in precolonial Buluyia, hunting and warfare were important men's work. Horticulture was mainly women's work. Men cleared fields, but women usually prepared soil, planted, weeded, and harvested. Only men planted trees, although women cared for them. Large animals were the domain of men and unmarried boys. Traditionally, the men milked the cattle in most of the subnations. Women owned and cared for poultry. Both women and men were involved in marketing: the women sold pots, products grown in kitchen gardens, dried fish, fruits, and grains bought from farmers in other regions. Only men took animals to market. House building has many stages, each with a division of labour; however, women generally repaired walls and floors, whereas men prepared thatching materials. Children contributed to subsistence: girls mainly in the home and fields, boys mainly with the herds. Boys and girls helped out with other tasks, such as tending younger children, gathering wood, and fetching water. Girls helped their mothers in selling (Hay 1975: 97).

Important crafts such as blacksmithing, pottery, basketry, woodworking (particularly, the manufacture of drums), and weaving were practiced. Blacksmithing had been passed down patrilineally in some clans. The Samia (especially the Abang'aale clan) were famous for blacksmithing and mining of iron ore. Manufacture of pottery was more often a woman's than a man's task—although Bukusu women of childbearing age could not quarry clay. Pots, that were traded and owned by women, were considered utilitarian. There was minimal evidence of specialization in the manufacture of everyday wood tools such as hoe handles, but were specialists who made drums, lyres, stools, and wood carvings.

The Luyia subgroups practiced trade among themselves in the precolonial era. Iron hoes, spear points, and ivory, for example, could be traded for grains or animals. Precolonial trade covered a distance of no more than 72 kilometres, but there were three precolonial markets where Luo, Nandi, and Abaluyia came together to trade baskets, wooden tools, quail, and various foodstuffs for cattle, fish, tobacco, and so forth. Hence despite their sometime conflictual relations they interacted amicably (Wright 1979: 184).

Conclusion

Original settlers in the western Kenyan terrain seemed to be of Bantu origin. Their route to this area were not very clear although efforts have been made to reconstruct this. The other Bantu-speaking people migrated out into western Kenya in a region near Lake Victoria. They began this move in the eleventh century, followed by other groups interested in agriculture. These people eventually became known as the Luyia. In the

sixteenth century the Nilotic-speaking Luo people, coming from what is now Uganda, pushed Luyia back towards the east. The Luo people adopted the agricultural practices of the Luyia for a while, but some went on to continue conquering new lands. In this quest for more territory, the Luo came up against the Bantu-speaking Kisii people, who were also on the same mission as the Luo, to expand into that part of the region. Along with these two groups vying for this territory, there was also the Nilotic people who were residing along the edge of the territory to the east. The territorial maneuvering by the three groups was not always peaceful as war over the land often erupted. The fighting over the land continued until British rule took control in the people. The interethnic relations between the Bantu and the Nilotes were not confined to confrontation. The Luo, Luyia and the Kisii shared much. Their economic systems were adapted to the same environments and their common words for domestic crops and tools bespeak an intimate contact. Moreover, between 1870 and 1900 they had fixed markets where all groups exchanged their products of different environments. Beyond all this the Luo sought to recruit strangers to be assimilated in their households and production units (Wright 1979: 184). These groups did not live in isolation from each other; they had various levels of interaction. They practice that Marcia Wright calls “convergence and conversion.”

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