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The Modern Day Gikuyun Farmer

The following are excerpts from a research project undertaken by Ramya Bavikatte on her Washington Semester at American University. Ramya traveled with her class to Kenya, where she learned more about the issues of small holder agriculture and the Gikuyun farmer.

The purpose of this research project is to study the economic and social implications of smallholder agriculture in Kenya. The shift of smallholders from subsistence farming to cash crop farming created significant changes in the standards of living, social security, reproduction, and the sexual division of labor. With the strong social impact of commercial farming, many Kenyans are wondering whether they are materially better or worse off than they were thirty five years ago.

One of the most evident ways in which commercial agriculture affects the Kenyan people is through ecological and land degradation. Due to the ever-increasing pressures put on the land, frequent aridity has led to greater risk of a bad harvest or even famine. Food relief to Kenya has become more common, therefore elevating the dependency on donor countries.

Since a well-organized system of providing social security does not exist in Kenya, the best assurance of economic security comes through the ownership of land. In addition to the land security, commercial agriculture provides an inlet for added security through market extensions. Market extensions aid farmers and their families by providing loan and investment services. Unfortunately, the population boom in Kenya, as everywhere in Africa, means less land and agricultural opportunities; consequently, the increased rural density has forced people to seek work in the cities. Although the city dwellers have more control over their work conditions, they are by no means financially stable since the work will inevitably be in the informal sector. All the needs of the city dwellers must be met by cash payments, of which they rarely have enough. Perhaps commercial agriculture is not entirely to blame for the population boom. It could be considered, however, as a catalyst for industrialization.

Industrialization coupled with commercial agriculture will exacerbate social tensions already in existence among the Kenyan people. Any shift towards higher productivity or income growth in the population as a whole must increase the range of wealth differences. Unfortunately, the economic gap between the North and South grows as wealth continues to transfer of the North's sector.

The Natural Environment of the Gikuyu Farmer

Gikuyuland makes up a large portion of the great East African plateau. Characteristically, this land includes a great series of ridges and valleys which sweep from the northwest to the southeast. The altitude of Gikuyu country varies greatly, from 4,000 feet to 8,000 feet. The Tuthu settlement is located on the slopes of the Aberdare range with an elevation of 8,000 feet. Water and the irrigation of crops are not a problems here since it rains frequently. There are two rainy seasons: the Long rains occur from March to June, and the Short rains occur from mid-October to December. The prevailing type of soil is very fertile red earth which is derived from volcanic ash. It has a fine-grained texture which enables the soil to be light to work, and yet holds moisture.

The Gikuyu family, called a nyumba in Gikuyu, consists of a man, his wife or wives and their children. The family and family life is considered the core entity of the Gikuyu society. When the children grow up, the sons remain to split up their father's land for their homesteads; the daughters join their husbands. A sub-clan, or mbari, consists of an extended family with a common male ancestry. "All the mbari traced their ancestry to the original ten clans, mihiriga, which are named after the legendary ten daughters of Gikuyu and Mumbi, the ancestors of the Gikuyu people" (Geoffrey Muriuki The Kikuyu in Kenya, 1994).

Before colonialism, men traditionally farmed and were in charge of the distribution and profit of their products. The women's farming job, however, was more domestic in nature as it concentrated on keeping kitchen gardens for home consumption and being occasionally involved in small-scale marketing. Colonialism, however, opened up new opportunities for commercial agriculture and wage labor, both of which were monopolized by the men. These "new opportunities" available through cash crop agriculture, have decreased the economic power and social status of women. Fortunately, women are starting to regain some of their lost economic power by monopolizing the secondary and tertiary sectors of the home market. This is most notable with the many women cooperatives now popular in Kenya, as well as in other African countries. The ownership of land is so vital that it is regarded as a religious entity

instead of an economic asset. In the past, a man could never marry if he was without a piece of land with a house and garden for his wife. Gikuyun women are considered very strong and essential tribe members. For instance, a married woman is regarded with high respect in the community. There still exists a clear division of labor between the sexes, however. Men dominate the jobs of cash crop cultivation and market, while the women cultivate crops meant for domestic consumption.

Personal Interviews and Anecdotal Evidence

The findings in this portion of the project were collected through interviews with Mr. Charles Kamau. Mr. Kamau, with his wife and ten children, reside on a one-acre piece of land near the southern side of the Aberdare forest. Both Mr. Kamau and his wife are teachers at the local primary school; Mr. Kamau grows and sells tea for added income. Their two daughters and eight sons have all received secondary education. Three of the elder sons are now married and have established themselves in some of the larger towns.

According to Mr. Kamau, the average small scale tea grower has one acre or land with 3,500 tea bushes growing on the plot. A farmer and his family pick the tea with the help of hired pickers. Hired pickers are paid per day, approximately 50 shillings, or by the kilo. After picking, the tea is taken to a collecting center where the tea is weighted and recorded. It is then processed at the factory, where it is graded (A or B) for consumption. The processed tea, is now ready for export to the United States and England.

The Kenya Tea Development Authority (KTDA), the tea industry's market institution headquartered in Nairobi, oversees tea collection, processing and distribution. The KTDA is responsible for the payment of tea harvests by the large and smallholders.

In accordance with market fluctuations on the price of tea, the farmer will receive a bank slip at the end of December to pay for his November harvest of tea. Rarely will a farmer receive the exact market value for the tea harvested. "Cess" is a tax that is deducted from the farmers paycheck. This money is taken out to pay for the maintenance of KTDA operations. The Cess tax goes towards paying for the transportation of the tea to the collection center and factory. The County Council Cess, is another tax which is imposed upon farmers to pay for the county tea board within the respective district. The board is comprised of elected members representing every location within the district. The tea council meets three times a year to discuss and solve problems that may arise. The C.C.C. tax amounts to a 1% deduction.

Fortunately, farmers have the opportunity to invest money into the KTDA by purchasing factory shares. The advice slip shows the amount deducted to pay for factory shares, if the farmer chooses to buy them. The dividend amount is the payment the farmer receives for the ownership of factory shares. The farmers receive this payment on an annual basis.

The KTDA also provides extra services to aid farmers in their production and financial security. The Fert CL is a payment taken out on a monthly basis to pay for fertilizer, which the farmers purchase at a subsidized price. The SACO CL is an organization of which the farmers can buy shares. This organization provides loans for school fees, hospital fees, development purposes or emergencies. If a farmer takes a loan through SACO, the money is paid back through an extra deduction from the advice slip. The amount is taken out in negotiated installments with interest at 1% compounded annually.

The second payment is a bonus that is paid at the end of the year depending on the interest of what has been sold through the KTDA for the past year. During the visit to Tuthu, many farmers were on strike due to the low second payment they had received for this year. Last year, the second payment was paid at 15 shillings per kilo; this year the amount was down by two-thirds to 5.45 shilling per kilo. Upon receiving the advice slip, the farmer takes the slip to a bank where he has an account. The total payment, as listed on the advice slip, is paid to the farmer. The slip is then clipped at the corners and stamped on the bank to signify paid on said check. A farmer gets one more benefit. The farmer, after showing his KTDA registered number, is able to buy both A and B grades of tea at a price much lower than the retail cost.