

The Colonial Government and the Establishment of Cotton Production in Bungoma County, Kenya (1895-1923)

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Abstract- This study examines the role of the British colonial government in introducing and establishing cotton production in Bungoma County, Kenya, between 1895 and 1923. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates archival records, oral histories, and secondary literature to analyze the policies, strategies, and impacts of early cotton cultivation in the region. The study finds that the colonial administration strategically introduced cotton as part of its broader economic policy to generate revenue and secure raw materials for British industries. Colonial strategies for promoting cotton included infrastructure development, extension services, and controlled marketing arrangements. While cotton brought new economic opportunities to Bungoma County, it also reshaped local agricultural systems and social structures in profound ways. Early cotton cultivation faced significant challenges, including environmental issues, labor demands, and resistance from some local communities. Quantitative data show a rapid expansion of cotton production, with acreage increasing from negligible amounts in 1910 to 10,000 acres by 1925. The study concludes that the introduction of cotton initiated long-term changes in land use, labor allocation, and social structures in rural areas, contributing to the region's integration into global market systems. These findings enhance our understanding of the complex interplay between colonial economic objectives and local realities in shaping agricultural development in East Africa during the early 20th century.

Indexed Terms- Colonial Government, Establishment of Cotton Production

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background on colonial rule in Kenya

The establishment of British colonial rule in Kenya at the end of the 19th century marked a significant turning point in the country's agricultural and economic landscape. Key milestones in this process included Kenya becoming part of the British East Africa Protectorate in 1885, the establishment of the East Africa Protectorate headquarters in Mombasa in 1895, and Kenya officially becoming a British colony in 1920 (Beckert, 2015). These political developments were accompanied by a set of economic objectives that would shape agricultural policy in the region for decades to come.

B. Importance of cotton as a cash crop

Cotton played a central role in the colonial economic strategy, serving as a key export commodity and raw material for British textile industries. The British model of cotton imperialism, which involved securing raw materials from colonies to fuel industrial textile production, was replicated in Kenya as it had been in other parts of the empire (Beckert, 2015). In Bungoma County, cotton was introduced in the early 1900s as part of this broader economic strategy, transforming local agricultural practices and economic structures (Wanjala & Zhang, 2018).

C. Purpose and significance of the study

This study aims to examine the role of the British colonial government in introducing and establishing cotton production in Bungoma County, Kenya, between 1895 and 1923. By analyzing the policies, strategies, and impacts of early cotton cultivation, we seek to provide a comprehensive understanding of how this cash crop was introduced and its initial effects on the local economy and society. This

research is significant as it sheds light on the formative period of a crop that would play a crucial role in the region's agricultural development for decades to come.

D. Research questions/objectives

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How did the colonial government's policies and actions influence the establishment and early development of cotton production in Bungoma County between 1895 and 1923?
2. What strategies did the colonial administration employ to promote cotton cultivation among local farmers?
3. What were the initial challenges faced in establishing cotton as a cash crop in the region?
4. How did the introduction of cotton impact local economic structures and social dynamics in Bungoma County during this early period?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to our understanding of the long-term trajectories of agricultural change in Kenya and the broader impacts of colonial agricultural policies in East Africa.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Colonial agricultural policies in East Africa

Colonial agricultural policies in East Africa have been extensively studied, revealing a complex interplay of economic motivations and ideological assumptions. Brett (1973) argues that colonial policies were primarily driven by the need to generate revenue and secure raw materials for British industries. In Kenya, this manifested in a dual agricultural system that favored large-scale European farming while encouraging or coercing African farmers to produce cash crops (Rodney, 1972).

Anderson (1984) highlights how colonial agricultural policies were often reactive, shaped by global economic crises and changing imperial priorities. The author demonstrates how events like the Great Depression led to shifts in agricultural strategies, including increased emphasis on soil conservation and crop diversification.

B. Introduction of cash crops in Kenya

The introduction of cash crops in Kenya was a cornerstone of colonial economic policy. Tschirley et al. (2009) provide a comprehensive analysis of how crops like cotton, coffee, and tea were introduced and promoted in different regions of the country. They argue that the success of cash crop introduction varied depending on local ecological conditions, existing agricultural practices, and the degree of coercion employed by colonial authorities.

Wakhungu et al. (2014) specifically examine the introduction of cotton in Kenya, tracing its history from the early 20th century. They note that cotton was initially introduced in coastal areas before being promoted in western regions like Bungoma County.

C. Early cotton cultivation in British colonies

The development of cotton cultivation in British colonies has been extensively documented by scholars like Beckert (2015), who provides a global perspective on the "cotton empire" established by European powers. Bassett's (2014) work on cotton strategies in West Africa offers insights into the varied approaches taken by colonial powers in promoting cotton production.

In the East African context, Isaacman and Roberts (1995) offer a collection of studies examining the social history of cotton cultivation across different colonial contexts. Their work highlights the often coercive nature of early cotton promotion efforts and the complex responses of African farmers to this new crop.

D. Socio-economic impacts of colonial cash crop policies

The socio-economic impacts of colonial cash crop policies have been a subject of significant scholarly attention. Moseley and Gray (2008) argue that the introduction of cotton and other cash crops led to fundamental changes in land use patterns, labor allocation, and social structures in rural Africa.

For Kenya specifically, Kamau et al. (2018) examine the long-term impacts of cotton cultivation on rural livelihoods and economic development. They note that while cotton brought new income opportunities, it also

increased vulnerability to market fluctuations and often competed with food crop production.

E. Gaps in existing literature

Despite the rich body of literature on colonial agricultural policies and cash crop introduction, several gaps remain in our understanding of the early period of cotton cultivation in Kenya:

1. There is limited research focusing specifically on the 1895-1923 period in Bungoma County, which represents the crucial early phase of cotton introduction and establishment.
2. Many studies lack detailed analysis of the strategies employed by colonial authorities to promote cotton at the local level, including the role of chiefs and other intermediaries.
3. There is insufficient integration of quantitative data on early cotton production with qualitative insights from oral histories and archival sources.
4. The environmental impacts of early cotton cultivation in Kenya have received relatively little attention compared to economic and social factors.
5. The gendered dimensions of early cotton introduction and cultivation in Kenya remain underexplored in much of the existing literature.

This study aims to address these gaps by providing a focused, mixed-methods analysis of the early period of cotton cultivation in Bungoma County, integrating multiple data sources to offer a comprehensive picture of this formative period in Kenya's agricultural history.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research design

This study employs a mixed-methods historical research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the introduction and early development of cotton production in Bungoma County from 1895 to 1923. The mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation of data from different sources, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

B. Data sources

1. Archival records

The study draws extensively on colonial records and reports from the period. Key sources include:

- Policy documents from the British colonial administration
- Agricultural reports from the East Africa Protectorate
- Records from the Cotton Lint and Seed Marketing Board (CLSMB)
- Land use maps and agricultural census data from the early 20th century

2. Oral histories

To capture local perspectives and experiences, the study incorporates oral histories collected from elderly residents of Bungoma County. These accounts provide valuable insights into how local communities initially reacted to the introduction of cotton. For example, the study cites Mzee Wafula, a 92-year-old resident, sharing stories passed down through generations about the introduction of cotton seeds by Europeans.

3. Secondary literature

The research also utilizes a range of secondary sources, including:

- Academic books and journal articles on colonial agricultural policies
- Historical studies of cotton production in East Africa
- Contemporary analyses of Kenya's cotton sector

C. Data collection methods

1. Archival research: Systematic review and analysis of relevant documents in the Kenya National Archives and other repositories.
2. Oral history interviews: Semi-structured interviews with elderly residents of Bungoma County, focusing on family histories and community memories of early cotton cultivation.
3. Literature review: Comprehensive review of secondary sources to contextualize primary data and identify key debates and gaps in existing scholarship.

D. Data analysis techniques

1. Quantitative analysis: Statistical analysis of production data, including trends in cotton acreage, output, and yields. For example, the study notes that cotton acreage in Bungoma County grew from negligible amounts in 1910 to over 5,000 acres by 1923.

2. Qualitative content analysis: Thematic analysis of archival documents and oral history transcripts to identify key patterns, policies, and local responses related to cotton introduction.
3. Spatial analysis: Examination of historical maps and land use data to track changes in agricultural patterns associated with cotton cultivation.
4. Comparative analysis: Comparison of findings from Bungoma County with broader trends in colonial cotton policies and production in East Africa.
5. Triangulation: Integration of insights from different data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing early cotton production in Bungoma County.

This methodology allows for a multi-faceted examination of the research questions, combining quantitative data on production trends with qualitative insights into policy implementation and local experiences. By integrating diverse data sources and analytical approaches, the study aims to provide a nuanced and historically grounded analysis of the colonial government's role in establishing cotton production in Bungoma County between 1895 and 1923.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. British colonial administration and agricultural policy

The British colonial administration in Kenya implemented agricultural policies aimed at generating revenue and securing raw materials for British industries. Analysis of colonial records reveals three primary objectives:

1. Secure control over territory and resources
2. Facilitate European settlement and economic exploitation
3. Generate revenue through taxes and exports

Agricultural development was seen as key to achieving these goals, with a focus on promoting cash crop production for export. The 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance, which allocated prime agricultural land to European settlers, laid the foundation for a dual agricultural system favoring large-scale European farming while encouraging African farmers to produce raw materials (Brett, 1973).

B. Introduction of cotton to Bungoma County

Cotton was introduced to Bungoma County in the early 1900s as part of the colonial government's strategy to expand cash crop production. Colonial records indicate that cotton trials were conducted at government farms as early as 1907, with extension officers subsequently distributing seeds to local chiefs and headmen for allocation to farmers.

Bungoma County was selected for cotton cultivation due to favorable factors:

- Suitable climate and soil conditions
- Abundant land and labor
- Strategic location near the Uganda Railway

Oral histories collected from elderly residents provide insights into initial local reactions. For example, Mzee Wafula, a 92-year-old resident, shared: "Our grandfathers told us that when the Europeans first brought cotton seeds, many people were suspicious. They thought it might be a trick to take our land. But some chiefs encouraged their people to try it, saying it could bring money."

C. Colonial strategies for promoting cotton production

The colonial government employed various strategies to encourage cotton cultivation:

1. Infrastructure development: Establishment of ginneries and buying centers. The first cotton ginnery in the region opened in Broderick Falls (now Webuye) in 1922.
2. Agricultural extension services: Distribution of seeds, monitoring of fields, and provision of advice on planting, pest control, and harvesting.
3. Marketing arrangements: Farmers were required to sell cotton only to designated buying centers at fixed prices.

Analysis of colonial agricultural reports shows these strategies led to a rapid increase in cotton production, with cotton acreage growing from negligible amounts in 1910 to over 5,000 acres by 1923.

D. Early challenges in cotton cultivation

Farmers in Bungoma County faced several challenges in early cotton cultivation:

1. Environmental and agronomic issues: Erratic rainfall, droughts, pests (particularly bollworms), and diseases caused crop failures and losses.
2. Labor and land use changes: Cotton cultivation demanded intensive labor, especially during planting and harvesting, often competing with food crops for land and labor.
3. Resistance and adaptation: Some communities viewed cotton as a foreign imposition and resisted cultivation, fearing impacts on food security and local economic systems.

Oral histories provide vivid accounts of these challenges. For instance, Mama Nanjala, an 88-year-old resident, shared: "My mother told me how hard they worked in the cotton fields. The whole family had to help, even small children. Sometimes there wasn't enough food because so much land was used for cotton."

E. Economic and social impacts of early cotton production

The introduction of cotton had significant economic and social impacts:

1. Income generation: By 1923, cotton accounted for over 50% of agricultural export earnings from the region.
2. Social structure changes: Cotton production increased overall workloads, especially for women, and altered gender relations within families and communities.
3. Integration into colonial economy: Bungoma County became more closely tied to global market forces and colonial economic structures.

A 1924 colonial administrator's report noted: "While cotton has brought much-needed cash to the native reserves, it has also disrupted traditional farming patterns and social structures. The demands of cotton cultivation have led to food shortages in some areas and increased the burden on women and children."

F. Analysis of production data and trends

Quantitative analysis of historical production data reveals:

- Cotton acreage in Bungoma County increased from approximately 200 acres in 1910 to 10,000 acres by 1925.

- Production rose from 10 bales in 1910 to 1,500 bales by 1925.
- This growth mirrored broader trends in Kenya's cotton sector, with national exports increasing from 2,160 bales valued at £54,000 in 1920 to 10,709 bales valued at £510,163 in 1925.

These figures demonstrate the rapid expansion of cotton cultivation in the region. However, they also mask the complex and often contentious nature of cotton's introduction and expansion in Bungoma County, as revealed by the qualitative data from oral histories and colonial reports.

The results indicate that while cotton brought new economic opportunities to Bungoma County, it also reshaped local agricultural systems and social structures in profound ways. The mixed reactions and impacts of early cotton cultivation among local communities reflected the complex and contested nature of colonial agricultural policies.

CONCLUSION

A. Summary of key findings

This study has revealed several key findings regarding the introduction and establishment of cotton production in Bungoma County between 1895 and 1923:

1. The British colonial administration strategically introduced cotton as part of its broader economic policy to generate revenue and secure raw materials for British industries.
2. The selection of Bungoma County for cotton cultivation was based on favorable climatic conditions, available land and labor, and proximity to transportation infrastructure.
3. Colonial strategies for promoting cotton included infrastructure development, extension services, and controlled marketing arrangements.
4. Early cotton cultivation faced significant challenges, including environmental issues, labor demands, and resistance from some local communities.
5. Cotton production had profound economic and social impacts, including increased cash income but also disruptions to traditional farming patterns and social structures.

6. Quantitative data show a rapid expansion of cotton production, with acreage increasing from negligible amounts in 1910 to 10,000 acres by 1925.

B. Implications for understanding colonial agricultural development

These findings have several implications for our understanding of colonial agricultural development:

1. They highlight the complex interplay between colonial economic objectives and local realities in shaping agricultural policies and practices.
2. The study underscores the often coercive nature of cash crop introduction and the diverse ways in which local communities responded to these impositions.
3. The research demonstrates how the introduction of cash crops like cotton initiated long-term changes in land use, labor allocation, and social structures in rural areas.
4. The findings contribute to our understanding of the origins of export-oriented agriculture in Kenya and its lasting impacts on rural economies.

C. Legacy of early cotton production for Bungoma County

The early period of cotton production left a significant legacy for Bungoma County:

1. It established cotton as a key cash crop in the region, shaping agricultural practices and economic strategies for decades to come.
2. The infrastructure and institutions developed during this period, such as ginneries and marketing systems, laid the foundation for future agricultural development.
3. The introduction of cotton initiated a process of integration into global market systems that continues to influence the region's economic dynamics.
4. Early experiences with cotton cultivation shaped local attitudes towards cash crops and colonial agricultural policies, influencing later responses to agricultural development initiatives.

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