



THE KABRAS PEASANT AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY IN KENYA BEFORE THE ENTRY OF SUGARCANE FARMING

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Abstract: *The article provides in-depth insights of the diverse peasant Kabras household subsistence agricultural economy before the entry sugar factories in Kabras-land. The article captures the historical aspects of the origin of the name Kabras, who the Kabras people are, their migratory trends to end up occupying their present Kabras-land. The article enunciated the peasant subsistence agricultural household before the arrival of the two sugar companies (Butali and West Kenya sugar companies) in the area, which had guaranteed subsistence household survival. With the dynamic nature of society, the Kabras retained their distinct identity despite their intricate interactions with diverse social ecological typologies on/along their migratory routes. This is therefore an attempt at understanding the dynamic and resilient Kabras prior to the arrival of West (Kabras) and Butali sugar companies.*

Keywords: Peasant, agriculture, household, subsistence, diversification

1.0 Introduction

The introduction of sugarcane farming as a cash crop and the sugar factories in Kabras was part of the country's attempts at industrializing rural areas while at the same time promoting African peasant agricultural production in rural western Kenya. However, the introduction of sugarcane farming and sugar factories was and still is characterized by complexities and contradictions which the Kabras have to cope with. The complex interplay between and among the competing Kabras interests in the area, the free market forces as well as the monetary market imperatives and the bourgeoisie resulted in the Kabras' subsistence peasantry economy going up into the sweet sugar smoke, that precipitates into banditism and the banditry economy. Although economists would call an inquiry into this question an inquiry into original accumulation, it ought to be called original expropriation.

Scholars have argued that African peasant agriculture like the Kabras possessed inherent philosophy which necessitated resistance to a free market monetarized agricultural production and as such, reproduced itself as a protective mechanism. The Kabras sugarcane production negates this logic. In particular, although Hyden (1980) postulated that capitalism and the monetary economy was not firm in grip to transform the African peasant agricultural production that was heavily embedded in the pillars of the economy of affection, for the Kabras, the sugarcane farming and the entire sugar economy was. Therefore, the sugar sector frustrated and eventually suffocated the economy of affection which was the subsistence beacon of hope leading the Kabras to resort to banditism and by extension the evolution of the banditry economy.

At the inception stage of sugarcane farming in Kabras and the establishment of sugar factories in the area, both the

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state and the bourgeoisie were circumvented as the free market forces were allowed to interact freely and directly with the Kabras peasant farmers who were easily lured into the venture courtesy of their weak bargaining power and their vulnerability to the free market forces and the monetary economy imperatives. As a result, therefore, the sugar sector In Kabras has created a few wealthy people (the bourgeoisie) from within and without Kabras who have continued to use it to further their 'primitive accumulation' in the area. However, it has created a majority of poor Kabras individuals who it inexorably entraps into the free exchange web for their own survival. Therefore, sugarcane farming is proportionally connected to poverty and the resultant banditism and banditry economy in Kabras.

1.1 The Geography and Topography of Kabras

The Kabras pattern of settlement and their agricultural occupations within Kakamega County was not accidental as already demonstrated but was a rather deliberate choice influenced by the geography of the location of the Kabras area. The Kabras people occupy the present day kakamega town which doubles up as the county headquarters. To the east, the Kabras are bound by the Nandi people and the boundary is the Nandi escarpment, which is an active volcanic escarpment that stretches north eastwards. On the north, the Kabras people borders their cousins the Tachoni whom as noted by Ndeda (2019) earlier they intermarry frequently, while the Bukusu are to the northwest at Lwandeti and Webuye respectively. Westwards, the Kabras are kept into interaction checks by the Banyala of Navakholo while the Batsotso locks them into location from the south and the Isukha from the southeastern side.

Topography wise, Kubasali and Chimoi hills marks the highest points in Kabras area and they act as natural boundaries with their feared Nandi neighbours. The area is drained by two major rivers which flow the whole year round. The river Nzoia to the north as a natural boundary with the Bukusu while the river Lusimu flows from the

heart of the Kabras to mature into the boundary between the Kabras and the Banyala and the river Isiukhu to the southwest ensures the security of Kabras-land from Isukha advances. On the whole, the entire Kabras is well watered with many smaller rivers and streams flowing from the escarpment side north westwards and southeast direction. The Lukume and Chegulo hills are other remarkable typographic features as high points within Kabras-land identified as agricultural hills like the Chimoi and Kubasali slopes. The famous Kakamega rainforest which is part of the Congo rainforest and is the northern tip of the Kakamega rainforest. This defines the agricultural vitality of the Kabras area, although it doubles up as a tourist attraction in the area. Being an active agricultural area, Kabras is dotted with markets which serve as commercial and exchange purpose. The renown markets within Kabras-land being Lubao, Kambi ya Mwanza, Malava, Butali, Chepsaita, Chegulo, Kubasali, Samitsi, Matete among others. General, Kabras-land tilts westwards and southwards.

Population wise, the Kabras population is characterized by intense population as per the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census statistics (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics {KNBS} 2019 which intensifies the agricultural activities in the area more so with the two established sugar factories in the area. This marked the solidification of the ethnic consciousness among the Kabras people. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census statistics, Kakamega North sub-county had a total population of 238,330 with a distribution of 115,511 male against 122,814 female with 5 people who are intersex. The total population of Kakamega North which is predominantly Kabras represent 12.7 percent of Kakamega County's population which is not only substantial, the population's crucial contribution to the county's agricultural economy cannot be underscored. The Kabras area has a total of 51,083 Households with an average Household of 4.7. The Kabras land area in square kilometres is 420.8 with a population density of 566 per



square kilometre. In Kabras-land the total number of community areas is 49 while that of the village units standing at 23. The population distribution per administrative ward and the approximate population distribution and approximate are of the Kabras is hereby tabulated;

Administrative Ward	Approximate pop.	Approximate Area
West Kabras	26,114	46.7
Chemuche	29,745	65.1
East Kabras	22,659	49.6
Butali-Chegulo	31,876	78.2
Manda-Shivanga	32,194	68.3
Shirugu-Mugai	25,055	54.4

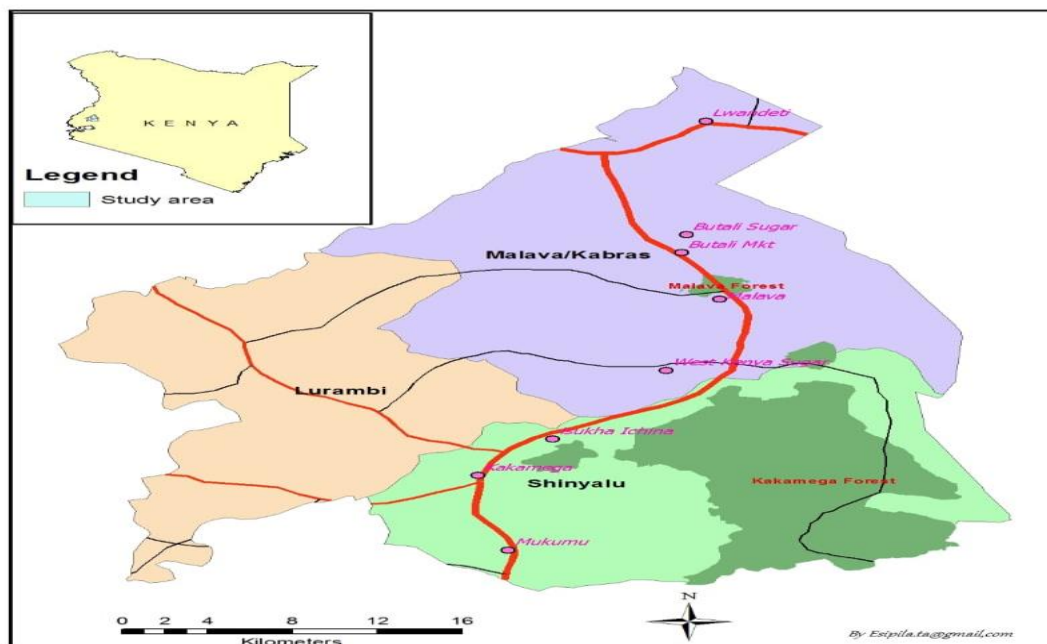
South Kabras	37,523	61.0
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Source: Kakamega CIDP 2018-2022.

<https://kakamega.go.ke/download/county-integrated-development-plan-2018-2022/>

This population distributions explains the quantity and quality of labour invested in the critical agricultural sector in the area especially with the entry of the two sugar factories in the area hence the struggle to earn a living both from the factory and from agriculture. This is made possible by the soil in Kabras-land which is extremely fertile red volcanic soils. The granite deposits soils from the Nandi escarpments as defined for instance by the volcanic Kubasali mudslides.

A MAP SHOWING MALAVA/KABRAS-LAND OF KAKAMEGA COUNTY



Source: Moi University, Department of Geography

1.2 Peopling Kabras

The Kabras people are an amalgam of clans just line their extended luhya community being a product of a highly



complex migrational movements. According to Were (1967), about 1598 and 1733 large scale migration from the Bantu areas of eastern Uganda and Baganda the ancestors of the majority of present day localities of Kabras, Tiriki, Wanga, Bukhayo, Samia, Marama, Bunyore, Butsotso, Maragoli and Marachi arrived about this time. The Kabras came from different directions, they not only interacted with each other but, also interacted with other communities and extensively borrowed from each other, a point at which Lonsdale, Ogot(1967), Barker(1989), Hobley(1903), Wagner(1949), Were(1967) and Ndeda (2019) converge. For instance, Ndeda notes that the Kabras came from western Uganda not many generations ago, and they are related to the Tachoni with whom they frequently intermarry. While corroborating Ndeda, Were, however, emphasises the fact that some of the Kabras clans came from Nandi origin. The Abakhusia clan of the Kabras according to Were gradually but not voluntarily, vacated their land for the Batsotso and established themselves in modern day Kabras. To this end, therefore, the Kabras represented the spearhead of migration into the area. Were further postulates that the Kabras were related to the Abanyala of Port Victoria and their ancestors arrived from Bunyala through Lubinu into Butsotso (what Shivakale calls Ingotse) before finally landing in Kabras-land. On a different migratory trajectory, Were accounts for the AbaKabradi as having been driven to their present homeland by the Abanyala of Navakholo who were fleeing from Teso invasion. Were further postulates that more Kabras arrived from Mbale area of Uganda and joined those from Butsotso. The group from Mbale, AbaKabradi/Abalasi are said to have lived and mingled with the Abatachoni at Mushibembe in South Bukusu before finally separating. Upon separation, majority of the Abatachoni eventually settled in Lwandeti which Were referred to North Kabras while most of the AbaKabradi/ Abalasi settled in South Kabras. A further inquest into the origin of the Kabras people reveals that

the ancestors of some AbaKabradi clans originally came from Ankole, in South-West of Uganda. The ancestors of this particular group Were notes are still living in Ankole and the adjoining territory of the Republic of Congo. This exponentially corroborates with Were's accounts of a migration by people of Bahima origin from Uganda to the Elgon district of Kenya. With the various migratory routes that the different Kabras clans used and the different communities they interacted with en-route to their present settlement, it therefore follows that the Kabras had a heterogeneous origin just like the larger Luhya community as noted by Ndeda(2019), Hobley (1903) and Were(1967)

The foregoing analysis and details attempts to answer Shivakale's (2014) greatest concern of who the true Kabras are. According to Shivakale, the name Kabras is a corruption of the word Abalasi which means shooters. According to the oral traditions of the Kabras, Abalasi were a renowned group of sharp shooters while on their hunting excursions and they comprised of the seven clans of the Abaluu, Abatobo, AAbamachina, Abachimalia, Abasilia, Abasoko and Abamutama. This fact is corresponded by Thompson's accounts of his encounter with the Kabras on the 28th day of November 1883. Shivakale notes that when Thomson asked the leader of the Abalasi who they were, Muchika their leader responded that they were Abalasi which Shivakale indicates that Thomson (1887) mispronounced and wrote as Kabras instead of Abalasi in his book "Through Masai Land". On a different account, however, Dundas (1913) in his book "*The Wanga and other tribes of Elgon District*" claimed that Abakamulamba clan were the true Kabras. This the oral traditions of the Kabras indicates was incubated by the persistent power struggles between the Abalasi and the Abakamulamba. On the other hand, oral traditions of the neighbouring Nandi community attempts to define the name Kabras as having originated in the colonial settler economy of the white highlands. According to the oral traditions, the name Kabras was



coined from the phrase “camp rahisi”. This is a combination of two words, the first word being the English word camp which meant a temporary holding or home of a group of people and the second one being a swahili word “rahisi” loosely translating to cheap in the English language. Therefore, camp rahisi was mispronounced by the neighbouring Nandi people as kapras while the luhya pronounced the same as Kabras, (the cheap camp), which meant a cheap labour reservoir for the white highlands. However, this could not out rightly be corresponded but Kanogo (1987) notes of the willingness of luhya to offer labour in the white highlands. At this point it must be reemphasized that the Kabras migration and their territorial maneuvering was not always peaceful as war over the land often erupted and their agricultural system was adapted to the same environments. Therefore, the Kabras did not live in isolation from other communities they interacted at the various levels resulting the practice of conversion and convergence.

1.3 The Kabras Set-up Prior to Sugarcane Farming

Among the Kabras, land was and still is a crucial resources to subsistence production and agriculture is the primary way of survival. With industrialization of the Kabras area, access to land for agriculture remains an emotive issue. This case as observed by Mukhwana (2013) is worsened by the transition from communal or group based land ownership to individual and exclusive ownership among the Kabras. Mukhwana further notes that the situation is compounded by the bourgeoisie land lease in the area. Therefore, with industrialization, land among the Kabras represents a complex property with convergence of multiple interests. Traditionally among the Kabras, as Norman Humphrey notes in his classical piece *The Liguru and the Land*, a communal based system existed with regards to land adjudication. In this case all members of the Kabras community had equal rights of access to land through their membership to a family. Traditionally, customary laws guided the

distribution and use of the available land which was a communal property. An individual did not acquire rights more than farming. The Kabras cultivated and reaped their produce under the purview of social security and in return, one maintained allegiance to the community by sharing in communal responsibilities and liabilities like helping the needy, giving produce during funerals and social functions like circumcision. In this sense all the produce were communal among the Kabras, which explains the strategic location of stores (*efiachi*) as described by Thompson: opposite the entrance is a chief wife's hut, in front of the doorway are several food stores. The fact that the food stores had to be conspicuously visible in front of the houses was for communality and collective responsibility. Besides the collective responsibility towards the land resource and as rightly observed by Norman Humphrey (1947) and agreed by Mukhwana, the clan elder (the Liguru) adjudicated over land issues among the Kabras and being a patriarchal society, he was assisted by the council of elders who were predominantly men. The Liguru with the help of the council of elders distributed land to the clans that made up the Kabras who in turn redistributed the allotments to the families that constituted the clan. However, as Mukhwana notes and a point affirmed by Humphrey and Ndeda, the Liguru to date holds sections of land as a trustee of any unallocated land in the area occupied by his people as he exerts control on untouched forest land, any trees whose value is realized such as shade trees for cattle in grazing areas or those used as meeting places were fully under his protection. In addition, the Liguru protected the salt licks in Kabras-land and other natural resources, so that the Kabras people as a whole would benefit from them equally and collectively. Moreover, the Liguru had the responsibility of safeguarding the cattle trucks and pathways to watering places/points, mobilized his people to carry out protective works when gullies began to damage their land and pathways. Crucial among his responsibilities, the Liguru in Kabras-land



protected rivers and had to ensure no cultivation was allowed along the banks of rivers and streams this as document by Humphrey was a crucial role of the Liguru in soil conservation which doubled up as a soil erosion curbing strategy, this was also a fish preservation and water pollution prevention measure. On the whole, the Kabras being a patriarchal society, men had the autonomy of decision making in appropriating and custodianship of land in addition to inheritance rights. Family land was traditionally inherited exclusively by sons. Although men exercised proprietorship over land, women had rights to use land either as daughters before marriage but with limitations from their brothers or that of their husbands after marriage. As Ndeda observed generally among the Luhya which applies to the Kabras, land was communal owned and the community controlled its allocation and disposal. Individual members of the Kabras community had exclusive rights 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 recognized that certain sections of the land allocated to individuals were open for use by the entire community and as already shown, this was under the custody of the Liguru. The Kabras therefore, evolved a complex system of land rights, individual ownership of cultivated land which could be inherited and the system of tenancy that authorized strangers among the Kabras to be given limited tenure where they paid no tribute for land this limited their exploitation of the land.

Traditionally, as Kanogo (1978), Ndeda and Mukhwana reveal labour was woven around the household, which was the prime pillar of agricultural production. Among the Kabras, the household hold harnessed family labour in its agricultural ventures, seldom if ever did they hire additional labour. This explains why the Kabras never developed a rural proletariat dependent entirely on wages before the arrival of West Kenya and Butali sugar factories. Before industrialization, the Kabras people were intrinsically motivated to work on their farms as

consumed what they directly produced from their household allotments. Therefore, the household/ family was the basic unit of agricultural production and consumption, making it constitute the labour reservoir required for production. Traditionally in Kabras-land, the family/ household was weaved around kinship, descent and marriage all of which not only defined the labour organization and relations of labour appropriation but more fundamentally dictated the size of the land to be assigned for appropriation by the family and households in the area. These dual indexes predominantly provided the economic and commercial justifications for the rampant investment by Kabras families and households in the institution of polygamy. According to Ndeda, Mukhwana, Humphrey and Ochieng' (1985), the size and composition of a household were significant components that predetermined the ability of a family to mobilize the disposable household labour. The basic definition of labour among the Kabras was a wife and her children who toiled to produce their own subsistence necessities from their allotment. This informed the famous saying among the Kabras "a household with many wives could not go hungry." The implication and realities in conventional Kabras-land was that women were seen as labourers and a source of labour. In this case, as labourers, women were to pre-occupy themselves with agricultural activities in the fields allocated to them by their husbands to guarantee the community of its subsistence survival. This in essence explains why traditionally in Kabras-land, in front of every wife's house was a granary (*eshiachi*) which announced to the community which wife was more productive depending on both the size of the granary and the quantity of agricultural produce in it. On the other hand, as sources of labour among the Kabras people, women were mainly to reproduce. Although it is a divine and cardinal function in marriage, women in Kabras-land as indicated by Mukhwana competed with each other in their polygamous family to have more children. The children were not only



for social security of the woman in marriage, but of economic value as the children provided the much needed labour at their mother's disposal to work on her allotment. Therefore, women and children in Kabras worked on the land allocated to their mother to produce food necessities for themselves. This rationalized the subsistence economy of affection among the Kabras. Moreover, the number of children (the amount of labour at the mother's disposal) predetermined to a large extent the size of land the family will be allocated for food production. The family labour matrix was even more complex and complicated as Ndeda, Mukhwana (2019) and Akama (2017) opines by the sex of the wife's children, as more sons were preferred in the agricultural sector compared to girls. According to Ndeda, the division of labour within a typical luhya (Kabras) home was based on both sex and age. Women, men, the young and the old played different roles although there existed overlaps. Among the Kabras people, males served as heads of households and families depending on the number of wives as in decision making regarding food production, some men exerted control over many aspects of household's operations, while others tended to delegate this authority to their sons (depending on the age) and their wives. The household heads (the husband) made sure that the land allocated to each family (wife) had been ploughed with the assistance of his sons of the particular wife and the rest of the agricultural chores went to the wife with her kids. The men as noted by Mukhwana, were additionally responsible for animal husbandry, clearing the fields before the women and children can embark on extensive agricultural activities in the agricultural cycle and they occasionally at will aided in cultivation of their most favourite wife and children. Women on their part were in control of the Kabras domestic economy and their economic production skills covered all domestic work, agricultural work limited livestock care. In addition, women responsibilities among the Kabras included basketry technologies and transportation and food storage

and security. Women carried out industries like pottery and basket weaving, carried water, grinded millet making millet beer, cooking in addition to reproduction. After the farm work, the boys were responsible for animal husbandry, and as Ochieng' observes livestock supplemented farm production. The equally engaged in hunting both as a subsistence food source and a protection of/for cultivated crops. The boys and occasionally men hunted animals for their flesh to supplement the vegetable diet provided by the agricultural activities of women. Moreover, cultivated crops in turn had to be protected from wild animals and birds and boys had the responsibility of preventing burrowing and grazing animals among the Kabras people from destroying crops tendered to by women by using trenches, pit traps, nooses, spears, arrows and dogs as well as clubs. Furthermore, after farm work, boys occasionally engaged in fishing activities although fishing activities were not accorded much significance. Fish among the Kabras was mostly caught by hook and line although occasionally by basket-nets. On the other hand, girls after the off farm activities collected firewood especially on the hedges which were slashed by their father during land preparation for the new farm season. They also went to the water springs to fetch water for the various domestic activities, in addition to accompanying the mothers and assisting in the grinding of flour in readiness for the preparation of the family's evening meal. The also sorted out bean in the evening and stayed late in the kitchen boiling the mixture of beans and maize, or boiling sweet potatoes and cassava to be served to the family members working on the farm the next day as breakfast accompanied by fermented porridge or tea. The girls partook in the family's laundry and clothes washing and cleaning of the utensils.

1.4 Kabras Agricultural Production Prior to Sugarcane Farming

According to Ochieng' most Kenyan communities (the Kabras included) practiced a simple form of agricultural



but as indicated by Mukhwana satisfied the household's subsistence basic needs/demands, where the hoe cultivation was the principal subsistence activity. Therefore, the Kabras agricultural economy was complex and diverse before the introduction of sugarcane farming. The complexities and the diversifications were geared towards providing food for the home stead probably a balanced diet in a traditional African sense and ensuring soil fertility as Ochieng' indicates, branches of trees and bushes were cut down and burnt to give additional fertility to the soil while the surplus was utilized in trade and commercial exchanges. The traditional agricultural economy was boosted by the fertility of the soil as already indicated in the area's topography. Kabras-land agricultural potential was best captured by Thompson (1887) in his book *Through Masai Land* while on his mission to Kavirondo when he noted...on the 28th November 1883, I entered the village of Kabras, picturesquely situated on the face of a boulder-clad hill, and surrounded by smiling fields. While Humphrey reveals the geographical setting of the Kabras which is on the slopes of the volcanic Nandi escarpments and the active escarpment typified by the volcanic Kubasali hills, reveals the fertility of the land, the productive and the reproductive vitality of the area. The fields according to Humphrey were agriculturally smiling. This is crowned by his description of the meal served to him and his entire team. He indicates, ...we were in the middle of abundance as we picked the bones of fat Kavirondo fowls, with accompaniments of groundnuts, sweet potatoes and maize. How delicious these good things tasted, and with what a glorious appetite we applied ourselves to them. The buffet served to the guests without notice or prior visitation arrangements did not only exemplify the Kabras people as being generous and welcoming, but, most importantly it pictured the deep productive fertility of the Kabras agricultural system peaked at the serving table with the diverse agricultural produce that were transformed into foodstuffs at their

disposal. These evidences the fact that Kabras-land supported a variety of food crops, a point corroborated by Ochieng' who notes with keenness that among the agricultural crops produced were sorghum, eleusine, millet, root and tuber crops were major staples in addition to bananas, yams, maize, groundnuts, sweet potatoes and cassava a point Makana agrees with when he wrote about Bungoma. The variety of crops grown in Kabras-land was well captured when Thompson narrated that almost every foot of the ground was under cultivation. Yet the people (Kabras) seem to have some idea of the value of a rotation of crops, for they allow land to lie fallow occasionally, such parts being used as pasture grounds for cattle and flocks. Sir Gerald Portal summed up that ever side of our immediate vicinity were fields of Indian corn, millet, beans of all kinds and sweet potatoes. Humphrey while singling out the place of cattle among the Kabras agricultural economy observed that a typical farm was planted by crops and grass on a remaining section. Terracing, contour planting and crop rotation are practiced and the cropping program contributes to a balanced diet, provided supplementary feed for stock and give a small surplus for sale. Among the Kabras people, cattle had great value as a storable wealth, an asset which could grow with proper management, surplus product for the people of Kabras. It further symbolized status among the Kabras as the poorer people had neither goods nor cattle. During the times of surplus farm produce, the surpluses were exchanged or treaded at the market places as narrated by Thompson; ... we passed a long a perfect lane of people, all carrying baskets of food which they were dying to dispose off for beads. There were honey, milk, eggs, fowls, beans etc. Among the Kabras, once the surpluses were sold at the market place by the women, the proceeds were brought home to the man who stored the value in the purchasing of cattle and flocks. While men stored their surplus value in cattle and flocks, women did so in poultry and this was visible in Thompson's observation of the Kabras hut. He



indicates that the hut depicts the most perfect good-fellowship existed between a couple cows (calves), three or four goats and sheep, a dog (puppy), sundry cock and hens in the rafters, the lady of the house, her lord (when it pleases him to visit her) and a lot of children. In addition, almost every hut according to Thompson had a bee-house. This was a hollowed log of wood fixed up inside, but with one end projecting through the wall to admit of the ingress and the egress of the bees.

1.5 Conclusion

The Kabras peasant subsistence agricultural economy began at household/ family level, then to the clan and eventually to the community level and was intricately tied around the household which gave the Kabras a collective responsibility sense. The centrality of the Liguru in the subsistence agricultural household economy of the Kabras was detailed. However, the article raises fundamental questions with regards the arrival of sugar factories and their implications to the peasant Kabras household economy. It further poses the question whether the sugar economy in the area raises banditism among the Kabras, eroding the Liguru's role in Kabras subsistence household economy with the initiation of land privatization. One can only speculate the peasant subsistence agricultural trajectory of the Kabras households and families with land privatization in the adversities of the sugar factories, a concern the subsequent study will seek to study. The fate of the traditional Kabras peasant household agriculture hangs in the balance due to the frontal attacks by the forces of industrialization in the area and the arrival of the bourgeoisie and the state. Some of the peasant subsistence household guidelines are rapidly fading away as a result of industrialization which occasioned this article.

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