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Effects of Colonial Influence on Soapstone Production in Tabaka, Kisii-Kenya 1895-1963

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Abstract

This study examines the impacts of colonialism on the soapstone industry and the transformations that occurred during the colonial period in Tabaka, Kisii County. Central to this shift was the introduction of colonial taxation policies, which forced locals to seek cash income. Before colonization, soapstone was largely used in barter trade and held cultural significance among the Abagusii. The pioneer carvers came from the Bomware sub-clan of South Mugirango, whose craftsmanship established the foundation of the industry. The study explores mining and carving processes, noting how traditional methods of extraction and crafting evolved over time. Anchored in Dependency Theory, it analyzes how colonial economic policies restructured local economies, fostering reliance on cash systems while exploiting indigenous resources for external markets. A mixed-method approach was used, drawing on secondary sources such as books and journals, alongside primary data from archival research at the Kenya National Archives. Findings show that colonial taxation transformed soapstone from a cultural commodity into a cash-generating product. Carvings gained value as tourist items, while soapstone was also industrially utilized in making insulators, chalk, and detergents.

Keywords: Soapstone carvers, Economic hegemony, Colonialists, Indigenous people, Transformation, Barter trade, Cash income

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1. Introduction

From 1895, British colonialism in Kenya formed an economic hegemony over the local people for more than half a century. The colonialists exercised control over the economic resources, including the labor force amid the indigenous African population. This economic hegemony was enforced through various means such as land appropriation, taxation, and policies that favored British economic interests, all of which allowed the

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colonialists to prosper at the expense of the local population. Thus, such domination was the center of the capitalist logic of commoditization of soapstone products in Tabaka area.

However, soapstone sculpture working in this area started long before the incursion of the European settlers in Kenya. During that pre-colonial period, soapstone carvers produced a wide array of items that held significant social and cultural values. However, the infiltration of British colonialism influenced unprecedented changes in the Tabaka soapstone activities. The influence of the colonial monetary system made a significant impact on this industry, heralding a new era in soapstone production in Tabaka. This research examines the transformative aspects of soapstone carving in Tabaka area, exploring how British colonialism and the emergence of capitalism in the 20th century shaped this craft and its utility.

2. Statement of the Problem

The commercialization of soapstone in Tabaka during the colonial period marked a significant shift in its use and value, transitioning from a sociocultural and barter trade item to a cash-generating commodity. This transformation was primarily driven by colonial taxation policies, which imposed a monetary burden on the local population, forcing them to adapt their economic activities to meet these demands. Despite the central role of soapstone in the local economy and its historical significance, there is limited scholarly attention on how colonial economic policies reshaped the production, use, and trade of this resource.

3. Objective

To examine the impacts of colonial taxation and other policies on the traditional uses of soapstone products in Tabaka, Kisii.

4. Historical Background

The Gusii people of Tabaka have a rich and enduring tradition of working with soapstone, a material that holds deep cultural, artistic, and economic significance for their community. The tradition of soapstone carving dates back many generations, predating the migration of the Abagusii community to the present Kisii Highlands, which occurred during the last quarter of the 18th Century. It is believed that even in ancient times, prior to the arrival of the Abagusii, the inhabitants of Tabaka were already engaged in soapstone sculpturing. This historical evidence is supported by the existence of prehistoric soapstone artworks, including rock art found at locations such as Goti-Chaki and Nyabigena Hills in Tabaka Division. These areas were inhabited by the Abamware, a clan of the larger South-Mugirango sub-ethnic group, and the presence of such prehistoric soapstone artifacts underscores the longstanding legacy of soapstone carving in Tabaka (Akama and Onyambu, 2018). The soapstone rock engravings and paintings from the aforementioned places conveyed cultural narratives, myths, and stories. Thus, soapstone engravings and pictures served as visual representations of the community's oral traditions and history.

The pioneering Gusii soapstone carvers belonged to the Bomware clan within the larger South Mugirango sub-ethnic group. They honed their carving skills by observing soapstone artworks located near their residences at Goti-Chaki Hills (Eisemon *et al.*, 1988). As a result, they disseminated these skills to other sub-clans in Tabaka region, including Bogetenga, Boikanga, Nyabigena, Nyabigege, and Moma, all of which were part of the larger South-Mugirango sub-ethnic group.

In the early days, soapstone was easily accessible because it was exposed to the earth's surface. Miners would select rocks of their choice based on their preferred colors, with soapstone coming in a variety of hues such as grayish, greenish, pinkish, and whitish. During the extraction process, miners utilized various tools such as hand axes, hammers, iron rods, and mining picks. Hoes and shovels were also employed to remove the topsoil before extracting soapstone from the ground. Likewise, various cutting tools including knives, saws, and chisels were used to shape the soapstone into different forms and sizes for their carving work (Njoroge *et al.*, 2015).

5. Primordial Uses of Soapstone Products

Soapstone products from Tabaka region served multiple purposes within the community. For example, it was used in the production of aesthetic objects such as sculptures. These exquisite pieces ranged from human

figures to depictions of wild animals such as giraffes, lions, antelopes, and elephants among others. Yet, the soapstone artisans were not limited to artistic endeavors alone. They also crafted functional items which were smaller soapstone household items designed for everyday use. These included bowls and plates for kitchenware and various containers such as pots of different sizes. Smaller pots were utilized as cow milking vessels, for fermentation, and for storing items such as beads, needles, and charms among others. Larger vessels, on the other hand, served to store grains such as millet, wheat, and barley, as well as commodities in powdered form like sugar and salt. The carvers even fashioned three-legged sitting stools known as “ebiteni,” standing at about one foot in height, which were used within the house due to their substantial weight and the risk of breakage. The meticulous journey of creating intricately crafted sculptures was unfolded through a comprehensive production process. It began with the initial stage of soapstone extraction and culminated in the final finished carvings. Throughout this artistic endeavor, division of labor emerged, shaped by considerations of gender and age where each participant contributed indispensably to the overall process. Men took on the challenging task of extracting soapstone from its natural reservoirs and transporting it to the carving sites. They not only excelled in the art of extraction but also exhibited their carving prowess by fashioning an array of sculptures. These included intricately designed bowls, pots, elegant smoking pipes, and even sturdy stools that stood at a height of about one foot (Onyambu, 2013). In a harmonious division of labor, women and children assumed the responsibility of refining and perfecting these carvings. They meticulously washed and smoothed the creations through a process of sanding, using a unique and locally known technique involving rough leaves from trees, which they referred to as “Omosenia” in their dialect. To add the finishing touches and a gleaming sheen to the soapstone products, they employed animal oil and fats, achieving a remarkable level of smoothness and shine (Ong’esa, 2022). This collaboration was not only a matter of craftsmanship but also it had economic implications. In the patriarchal society of the time, men controlled the earnings derived from their skilled work. They accessed these earnings primarily through barter trade, a system where their meticulously crafted sculptures were exchanged with other Gusii clans and neighboring communities. This exchange allowed them to acquire essential commodities and foodstuffs that were not locally produced (Ong’esa, 2022).

Several soapstone products held spiritual significance within the community. Human and animal figurines, for instance, were seen as representations of gods, spirits and ancestors. Additionally, soapstone pots were employed as vessels for offering sacrifices and conducting rituals. Soapstone powder also played a vital role in traditional religious practices. It was applied to the bodies of various specialists such as sorcerers, seers, and priests, during sacred ceremonies. This powder adorned their bodies as they invoked spirits, ancestors, and gods while unraveling mysteries and misfortunes in the community. It was also used by rainmakers during times of prolonged dry spells. Similarly, rainmakers adorned themselves with soapstone powder as they organized a special dance known as “RibinaRio’mogusii,” in the local dialect, to appease the gods and bring the much-needed rain. This dance was held primarily on the hilltops of various hills in Kisii land, such as Sameta, Manga, and Kegochi hills among others. Similarly, it held a special significance for warriors, “Chinkororo” especially when engaging in conflicts with other communities, such as the Maasai. The belief was that by adorning themselves with soapstone powder mixed with specific herbs, warriors not only enhanced their appearance but also acquired a boost of courage that instilled fear in their enemies. In addition to these diverse applications, soapstone powder found use in house beautification. When mixed with red ochre, it was applied to the mud-walled houses thus enhancing their aesthetic appeal. This practice was especially prominent during celebrations like initiation and marriage ceremonies.¹

Beyond its cultural and artistic significance, soapstone carving was a means of livelihood for many in Tabaka community. They engaged in barter trade with neighboring communities, exchanging their soapstone products for essential items. From the Luo community, they acquired smoked fish, ropes, and clay pots in exchange for carvings and smoking pipes. Similarly, they obtained red ochre, ghee, cattle, and iron implements from neighboring communities like the Kipsigis and Maasai in return for soapstone items. This economic exchange allowed soapstone artisans to access goods they did not produce, thus supporting their families and livelihoods.² This intricate network of trade not only showcased their craftsmanship but also facilitated the

¹ Onyambu, M. and John S. Akama (2018). The Evolution and Resilience of the Gusii Soapstone Industry. *Journal of African Cultural Heritage Studies*, 1-17.

² Oral interview with Moses Ong’esa, Chairman Simolart Self-Help Group at Tabaka Township on 23/8/2022.

exchange of diverse goods among communities, hence strengthening social ties and enhancing the overall quality of life in the region.

6. Commercial Production of Soapstone in Tabaka During the Colonial Era

In 1895, a pivotal moment in Kenya's history unfolded with the arrival of the Imperial British East Africa Company. This marked the commencement of a new era, as the British streamed into the region with dual motivations - imperialism and commercial interests. Their overarching goal was to secure valuable raw materials and priceless minerals for their industries back in Britain. In pursuit of these ambitions, the colonialists were determined in their mission to gain control over Kenya's economic resources.

The construction of the Kenya-Uganda Railway, undertaken by the colonialists shortly after they arrived in Kenya, played a crucial role in facilitating their movements and penetration into the interior parts of the country. In 1901, stretching from Mombasa, the railway reached the shores of Lake Victoria in Kisumu. The colonialists managed to extend their influence deep into the region, particularly in various parts of South Western Kenya (Walter, 1973). In 1909, the colonial administrators, white farmers, explorers, and traders had firmly established themselves in different parts of Kisii land, including the Tabaka region (KNA File No. DC/KSI/3/6). This area emerged as a focal point for soapstone, one of the mineral resources which the colonial authorities were interested in exploitation. This encounter went on to have profound impacts on the local community and their traditional ways of life. This intrusion of the colonialists brought about a series of transformations, disruptions, and changes that reshaped the lives and livelihoods of the soapstone working-people in the region.

The colonial authorities imposed colonial taxation policies such as the hut tax which had a profound impact on the socio-economic practices of the locals in Tabaka. This was because they needed funds to support their governance and infrastructural projects. Colonial taxes changed the mode of economic practices of the community. The Gusii soapstone workers, who relied on the exchange of soapstone products in a barter system of trade were forced to transit to monetary business. The necessity to engage in money-based transactions for their soapstone products meant that they had to adapt to a new economic reality of paying taxes which were dictated by the colonial government. To ensure taxation compliance on the locals, the colonialists imposed punitive measures for non-payment.

Soapstone workers embarked on a strategic quest to meet their colonial tax obligations. They skillfully navigated this challenge by fostering trade relationships with neighboring communities, notably the Abaluhya and Luo. Their shrewd market expansion efforts, particularly in the thriving "Riosiri" marketplace near Luo territories, significantly broadened their economic reach. By diversifying their business and offering their household soapstone products to a broader range of customers, they not only expanded their customer base but also effectively mitigated their burden of taxation (Mochama, Oral Interview, 2022).

In 1918, the colonial authorities in Kenya intensified their efforts on the economic exploitation of soapstone resources. This was their historical pattern of exploiting resources from their colonies for the benefit of the imperial power. Soapstone, being a valuable and versatile resource, was not exempted from this strategy. Soapstone blocks along with agricultural products, found their way to international markets. These included European countries such as Britain, Russia, Belgium, Germany and other European nations. This export activity heralded a significant transformation in the economic landscape, shaped by colonial influence and policies (Overton, 1986). As a consequence, the traditional uses of soapstone within the Gusii community underwent a profound metamorphosis. Soapstone became an export commodity for the benefit of the imperial power.

Colonial powers often demanded cheap labor from the local population to extract soapstone, one of the valuable resources, from mines. This was a form of economic exploitation, as the colonial authorities sought to maximize their profits while paying as little as possible for labor. The local miners, understandably, resented this exploitation because they were not being fairly compensated for their work. They were paid low wages as they worked under poor conditions and little job security (KNA, File no. PC/NZA/2/17/14, 1942). This contributed to local soapstone workers' resistance against the colonial authorities. Their reluctance to work in mines was manifested in various forms, such as strikes, protests, go-slows or even more direct forms of opposition to colonial rule.

Nevertheless, under the weight of their tax obligations, the miners found themselves in a distressing predicament, one that forced them to persist in their labor within the unforgiving confines of the mines, despite the starkly exploitative nature of their work. Their plight was characterized by a grueling and unrelenting work schedule, with laborers enduring extended and exhausting hours in their daily toil. The paradox, however, lay in their pitiful remuneration, which often amounted to as little as 12 Rupees per month for the backbreaking work of excavating and loading soapstone rocks onto tracks (KNA, File no. PC/NZA/2/17/14, 1942).

The discontentment of the soapstone workers with the colonial authorities resulted in severe repercussions as they became the target of the colonial agents' wrath. The situation took a turn for the worse, particularly in 1942, when the colonialists sought to send samples of soapstone blocks to the Geological Department in Entebbe, Uganda, for experimentation, aiming to determine whether soapstone could be utilized in the production of glass articles. To assert their absolute control over the soapstone industry, the colonial authorities imposed stringent supervision on the miners. They integrated colonial chiefs into their governance structures, a strategic move intended to enhance their absolute control and exploitation of the soapstone industry for their benefit (KNA, File no. PC/NZA/2/17/14, 1942).

These colonial chiefs wielded their authority with brutality and ruthlessness, subjecting their people to harsh and oppressive working conditions. Driven by the prospect of a reward of 16 Rupees per month for their supervisory work, they pressured the miners to meet stringent production quotas, further exacerbating the already challenging labor conditions. The colonial administrators skillfully exploited this system of control to maximize their profits, often at the expense of the tireless efforts of the soapstone workers. This state of affairs meant that the workers had limited autonomy over their earnings, as they were subjected to the arbitrary taxation decisions and demands of the colonial authorities. It exemplifies a troubling chapter in history where colonial powers leveraged their dominance to exploit both the natural resources and the labor force of the region, leaving the workers with little agency and subjected to harsh conditions in the pursuit of profit for the colonial administration (KNA, File no. PC/NZA/17/14, 1942).

In 1943, the colonial traders' interest in soapstone products increased as the demand for soapstone had surged, due to its exceptional economic potential, aligning with the imperialistic goals of the colonial administration. To further explore the potential applications of soapstone, the colonialists conducted scientific tests to ascertain its suitability as a raw material for various industries. Samples of soapstone chippings from the Kisii region were supplied to the Scientific Secretary in Nairobi through the District Commissioner in South Kavirondo, Kisii (KNA, File no. PC/NZA/2/17/14, 1942). The investigation revealed that soapstone could serve multiple purposes. Firstly, it was found to be ideal for the manufacturing of insulators that were impermeable to water and featured smooth surfaces. This uniqueness made soapstone insulators highly favored by colonialists, missionaries, and travelers both in Kenya and overseas ([United Nations Industrial Development Organization Vienna, 1981](#)). The colonial government sold these insulators within the local market while exporting the rest to foreign countries. Secondly, soapstone could be utilized in crafting ornamental items such as bowls, plates, vases, candlesticks, and pipes, catering to the growing demand for aesthetically pleasing home decor and functional items. Finally, the tests demonstrated that soapstone could be used in the production of chalks, soap adulterants, and cement ingredients, expanding its utility beyond art and aesthetics to practical industrial applications (KNA, File no. PC/NZA/2/17/14, 1942).

The period following the end of the Second World War in 1945 witnessed a notable global expansion of soapstone carvings. This growth was primarily as a result of the stabilization of the global economy, which had been disrupted by the conflicts of the world wars. With economic stability returning to normalcy, the demand for soapstone carvings surged on the international stage. This resulted from the arrival of the high number of international tourists who visited Kenya and returned with the carvings that they had bought as mementos. This increased external demand for soapstone products led to a growing need for higher-quality items ([Onyambu and John, 2018](#)). To meet these demands, the use of sophisticated machinery became increasingly evident as an essential tool for the soapstone carvers. Thus, the colonial government introduced various machines designed to refine and enhance the quality of the soapstone products. These included metal chisels, smoothing planes, sandpaper, drilling machines, and other carving implements. These tools revolutionized the soapstone carving process, allowing artisans to work with greater efficiency and precision. The result was the creation of more advanced and attractive soapstone products which met the demands of foreign clients ([Omosa, oral interview 2022](#)).

This technological advancement not only improved the quality of soapstone carvings but also expanded the range of items that could be produced, catering to the evolving tastes and preferences of the global market. It marked a significant shift in the soapstone industry, allowing artisans to create intricate and refined pieces that were highly sought after by collectors, tourists, and enthusiasts around the world. The use of machinery and advanced tools played a pivotal role in the commercialization of soapstone products and their ability to reach a wider audience, ultimately boosting their prominence in the market.

The availability of these industrial products inspired local artisans to produce more elaborate and intricate carvings. Access to manufactured ornaments and toys for the children of white settlers, missionaries, and other foreign societies played a crucial role in shaping new models and designs of soapstone carvings. These products of aesthetic value were consumed locally by the colonial settlers, missionaries, and administrators. The demand was due to the infusion of new styles and techniques into their cultural soapstone carvings, resulting in a wide range of exquisite pieces. These included images of eggs, hearts, and angels, as well as practical items like chess-set boards, candleholders, plates, bowls, and much more. They also created ornamental pieces such as bookends, flower-pots, bowls, human figurines, and detailed depictions of wild animals like giraffes, lions, leopards, hippos, rhinos, and elephants (Mahony, 2012).

The production of these intricate soapstone carvings involved a meticulous sequence of steps. It all started with the careful crafting of the soapstone, shaping it into precise forms and dimensions to bring the artist's vision to reality. Subsequently, the artisans meticulously carved the soapstone into the desired sculptures, paying close attention to every detail. Artisans accurately carved the soapstone into the desired sculptures, refining their surfaces by expertly rubbing them against dried grass. To enhance the durability and resilience of the soapstone carvings, they were subjected to a transformative process involving heat. The pieces were carefully placed over a blazing fire, causing the soapstone to become more workable. Skilled artisans then proceeded to accurately polish the surfaces, imparting a brilliant shine to the final product. This was achieved by gently applying ghee with a soft cloth, creating a lustrous finish. These refined and elaborate carvings captured the attention of a broader audience and became highly sought after, both within Kenya and internationally. This marked a significant evolution in the soapstone carving industry, where traditional craftsmanship met modern influences to create beautiful and unique pieces that gained prominence in the market.

The intricately carved sculptures found a diverse array of buyers and admirers. Locally, items were popular among white settlers, missionaries, colonial administrators, and Indian communities. They also captured the fascination of international explorers and tourists who flocked to Kenya for leisure (Onyambu and Akama, 2018). As these visitors explored Kenya's natural and cultural treasures, including wildlife conservation zones and coastal beaches, they encountered these alluring carvings. Tourists' attraction to the sculptures prompted many to purchase the art pieces, often found at the entrances of game parks, coastal beaches, and major cities like Nairobi, Kisumu, Mombasa and even some towns such as Eldoret, Nakuru, Kisii and others. Tourists, eager to hold on to their Kenyan experiences, frequently carried these soapstone carvings back to their home countries. As souvenirs and tokens of their journey, these sculptures became cherished gifts for friends and family. Thus, the sophisticated artistry of these carvings transcended borders, making them not only beautiful art pieces but also symbols of the global appeal of Kenyan craftsmanship.

The heightened demand for soapstone carvings in foreign markets had significant negative repercussions on soapstone carvers (Fahnbulleh, 2006). It gave rise to intermediaries who purchased soapstone at low prices on behalf of colonial authorities and subsequently sold them at much higher prices in international markets. Notable figures in this trade were colonial middlemen such as Mr. Robert Colson, Mr. Koensburg and others who, along with the Indian brokers residing in Kisii town, played a pivotal role in collecting and exporting soapstone carvings to international markets. Locally, brokers primarily sold the sculptures to local foreigners such as colonial administrators, white settlers, Indian communities, Christian missionaries and others who were based in major towns and cities such as Nakuru, Nairobi, Kisumu and Mombasa. They exported the carvings to various countries such as Germany, Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, as well as Asian nations such as India, the Philippines, and China. Additionally, the sculptures were exported to other African countries for example Uganda, Zambia, South Africa, Tanzania, Ghana and others (Fahnbulleh, 2006).

The situation was characterized by limited artisans' access to international markets, and lack of infrastructure, information, and resources for export trade. Thus, the middlemen capitalized on these limitations and exported the sculptures at inflated prices, leaving the artisans at a considerable disadvantage. These inequalities exposed the artisans to poverty and economic vulnerability, as they received only a fraction of the true value of their craft, while intermediaries reaped substantial profits from their sweat.

7. Conclusion

This chapter delved into the historical trajectory of soapstone carving, tracing its roots and evolution through both the pre-colonial and colonial eras. The narrative contends that the advent of colonial forces marked a significant turning point in the utilization of soapstone, transitioning it from its traditional roles to becoming commodities for international trade. This transformative shift into commercial items that were associated with profits attracted intermediaries, who played a central role in the undervaluing of local carvers' sculptures in the Tabaka area as they sold them exorbitantly in foreign markets. As the demand for soapstone artifacts increased on the global stage, these brokers capitalized on the skills of indigenous carvers, often exerting economic pressure and manipulating trade dynamics to their advantage. The chapter explores how this shift in the soapstone industry not only altered the cultural significance of the craft but also brought about complex socio-economic dynamics, shedding light on the intersections between colonial influences, trade practices, and the exploitation of local artisans.

These objects, ranging from intricate sculptures to ceremonial items, became integral to social rituals and practices, contributing to the cultural identity of the society. Economically, soapstone held practical value as a versatile material, utilized for crafting tools, utensils, and other everyday items essential for daily life. Its abundance and malleability made it a valuable resource for meeting various domestic and economic needs within local communities. Thus, in the pre-colonial era, soapstone was intricately woven into the fabric of daily life, simultaneously serving utilitarian and economic functions that contributed to the overall well-being and cohesion of the societies that engaged with this versatile material. Thus, the carvers in Tabaka bartered soapstone products with other neighboring communities to get what they did not produce. For example, the soapstone carving community received smoked fish and pots from other neighborhoods such as the Luo in exchange for soapstone items.³

However, during the colonial period, soapstone products were transformed into serving colonial economic interests. In the context of British imperialism in Kenya, several factors led to the transformation of soapstone products into international commodities for commercial purposes. For example, the introduction of manufactured goods made the use of soapstone products redundant. Coupled with colonial tax policies prompted the soapstone carvers to make items of aesthetic value. Such objects were consumed locally by foreign societies such as colonial administrators, white settlers and missionaries and the rest were exported. Europeans bought the carvings from the carvers to decorate their houses, offices and mementos as they returned to their foreign countries. Through tourism activities from 1945 onwards, the spread of soapstone items to various countries raised its demand in foreign markets. Consequently, colonial intermediaries emerged and integrated Tabaka soapstone carvings industry into the global economic order.

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