

Resistance and Politics of Survival: The Moral Economy of a Tobacco Producing Peasantry in Kenya, 1945-2002

Onserio Arori Wilfred^{1*} and Babere Kerata Chacha²

¹MA Student, Department of History, Mount Kenya University, General Kago Rd, Thika, Kenya

²Senior Lecturer, Department of History, Laikipia University, Oloo St, Eldoret, Kenya

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*Corresponding author: Onserio Arori Wilfred

Abstract

Review Article

During the late 1960's, BAT Company under state support controlled the tobacco contract farming that was starting to flourish in the fertile areas Kuria District in the southwestern parts of Republic of Kenya. From the beginning, tobacco proved to be a suitable cash crop for these poor peasants who were constantly struggling against a paucity of hard currency and declining pastoral economy. After years of successful tobacco planting, Kuria became symbols of prosperity. Even though the influence and power of the merchants and international conglomerates, was increasing, the cultivation of tobacco remained almost exclusively the field of a legion of families, who produced mounting loads of this crop. The case of tobacco production in this area demonstrated that minor-degree peasant agriculture could lead to increasing production for the export market. Because of their subsistence lifestyle, the tobacco producers were considered by many to be hardworking, honest, and thrifty citizens. According to some then-contemporary observers, this self-dependent lifestyle would lead the nation to a more democratic and egalitarian society. But that was not to be the case, the Kuria were once again in a perpetual crisis having been transformed by powerful forces of an international conglomerate in the course of few decades, from self-sufficient and haughty independent-minded tribesmen into poverty-stricken famine relief clients now living on ecological as well as political margins of the Kenyan society.

Keywords: tobacco planting, demonstrated, political margins, Moral Economy.

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TOBACCO CONGLOMERATE AND PEASANT ECONOMY

Too often the Kuria peasantry have been disregarded or misinterpreted by scholars in the past. However, in order to conduct a significant study of the tobacco peasantry in Kenya scholars should take the peasant society itself as a point of departure. It becomes important to understand the relation between the peasant farmers and the tobacco market, and to inquire about the social relationship of the peasant class and the governing class. The origin of the tobacco peasantry resides in the fact that the ready availability of land warranted their political and financial independence. Moreover, the nature of the tobacco cultivation permitted the peasant to look for supplementary crops and wages, promoting in this way a variety of fruitage and migratory labor. In the Kenya peasant society, the tobacco leaves were the basis for the majority of commercial activities. Credit, instead of hard currency, was what most producers were able to obtain for their crops. Sometimes what the tobacco trader sought met

with the peasant producer's interest. The peasant needed the trader to sell his product, and the trader depended on the peasant and his product. However, too often the peasant experienced injustice in the exchange with local monopolies.

The history of the tobacco peasantry in Kuria provides us with a case study on the evolution of the peasant society. Peasant autonomy, originally due to the abundance of land, was limited by the immersion of the local market in the international arena. Even after the railroad and ambitious entrepreneurs acquired large tracts of land, this emerging landowning elite did not curtail the lifestyle of the peasantry. Some amount of autonomy was still characteristic to the tobacco peasants. Relations and distance between the elite and the peasantry were carefully guarded and respected by both sides. It was in this context that "compadrazo" and other systems of loyalty acquired a new and consequential meaning.

These strong paternalistic relations provided the peasantry with a buffer of protection against external threats, while securing local political dominance and a labor force for the elite. The Kuria farmers represented a formidable economic and political force in the area. They drew their economic power mostly from their dependency on the international market, particularly from the BAT. With the cash or credit they received from the cattle sells, the Kuria merchants were able to purchase tobacco from the peasants and modern consumer goods. This condition was very financially unstable for the merchant, and their insecurity worsened with several commercial crises in the Kuria region by the end of the nineteenth century.

Post-colonial Politics and Moral economy of tobacco

After the Kenyan independence in 1963, Kuria district (then Kehancha Division) emerged as one of the most economically productive regions in Kenya both in livestock and crop production [1]. With wealth of huge ripe land, the region was named a high potential territory by the Ministry of Agriculture. By 1964, the division had framed a solid advertising board that sold a yearly normal of 300,000 packs of maize from a bunch of little scale agriculturists which by 1995 had dropped to 20,000. This would later be credited to various calculates, for example, decrease showcasing associations for maize in the region as well as the opposition from the tobacco edit. Then again, cows from Kuria sold to the Kenya Meat Commission amid the 1960s comprised a bigger level of aggregate deals from Nyanza Province. These were be that as it may, to decrease step by step with the presentation of tobacco.

It is argued here that, constant marginalization and political peripherisation of the region and the introduction of tobacco production from the late 1960's succeeded transforming the Kuria into a petty commodity producers for the tobacco companies such as the British-American Tobacco (BAT), Mastermind Kenya and Stancom Limited. The complexities of this relationship between companies and the local producers are part of the complex historical relationship that has existed between the multinational companies, the Kenyan state and the peasantry.

The Kuria Peasantry

The Kuria had a turbulent history. At some times they were called 'a pool of colonial migrant labour systems' (*as amachomba*) [2], or being

'reluctant' and 'backward' agro-pastoralists, or participants to the international capital at other times they have been almost isolated from that very market. Perhaps in making a harsh analysis, Ochieng describes the Kuria transformation:

In almost every decade in the last century, these people have endured crises of the worst sort—transformed from a rich, haughty and independent-minded pastoralist community into petty commodity producers, cattle rustlers, and famine relief-clients [3].

But within the context of such flux and turmoil, there has been one striking continuity: their long-standing history and complex relations with each other and interesting response they have adapted to such forces of change. To begin with, this work will show how the mapping of this little corner of Bukuria could help us understand the broader picture of the nature of contemporary capitalism.

The history and anthropology of the Kuria is a rapidly growing field to which Africa or africanist scholars have immensely contributed in terms of unveiling the intricate linguistic, ritual, agriculture, social organisation and also tended to work towards theoretical and practical understanding of the process of politico-economic transformation. Anthropologists have long regarded Bukuria as a 'problem area' with respect to agricultural development citing the low levels of crop production and animal husbandry with a firmer opposition to land consolidation and registration [4]. One writer for example suggested that economic progress had been slow because Kuria clung to the ritual value system and because their wants were generally limited to cattle and wives. Thus the stereotype of the Kuria peasants as arch-conservatives has become well established but this section prove otherwise and illustrate that the rate of economic change in the late nineteenth century was greater than any subsequent period.

The Kuria claim a diverse ancestry, one which probably did not begin to distinguish itself as "Kuria" until the nineteenth century [5]. According to oral tradition, migrations of Bantu-speaking peoples from North of Mount Elgon brought the early ancestors of the Kuria, Gusii, Kikuyu and several other groups into present-day Nyanza sometime during the sixteenth

popularly known as *amachomba*. The Kipsigis used an almost similar terminology *chombet* meaning someone who works away from home in large towns or cities. See also, H. Mwanzi, *The History of the Kipsigis*, p. 73

³ W.R Ochieng, Editor, *The Democrat, The Kuria of South Kenya*, p. 9

⁴ John A. Grim, *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology, in Worldviews and Ecology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994).

⁵ Paul Abuso, *Traditional History of the, C.A.D. 1400-1914, Kenya Literature Bureau, Nairobi, 1980. p. 14*

¹ Friedberg discusses in detail reasons why the colonial government did not settle permanently in kuria "despite the region being one of the most productive in Nyanza?..." See, S. Friedberg, "Changing Values in Kuria Agropastoralism" (Yale, 1987), p. 4. Similar sentiments were expressed in annual reports for South Nyanza at that time, see Chacha, "Agricultural History", pp. 180-220

² See chapter 3 (three) of Chacha Thesis, "Agricultural History" the Kuria migrant labourers had formed a class

century [6]. Some continued east into the Central Kenya Highlands while others, including the Kuria forbears, settled along Lake Victoria. Waves of Nilotic Luo from the Sudan arrived in the area shortly thereafter; those Bantu unwilling to assimilate moved southeast into the cool highlands, where they encountered on one side advancing Kipsigis and the Maasai. Around 1820, after a series of sporadic raids, the latter group stormed the villages of the Bantu highlanders, killing, burning, and, of course, confiscating cattle [7]. According to Abuso, those who fled northwest became the Gusii; those who headed south eventually settled in a region they called Kuria. Although the Kuria initially decided to settle in their present homeland because its hills acted as natural fortresses against Maasai invasions the region proved well suited for agriculture [8].

Feeling isolated, the Kuria began to address problems pertaining to employment, education and agriculture that had been inherited from the period of colonial rule. However, only a few infrastructural changes such as the expansion of roads and the market sector were effected. Even so, by the end of the 1960s, a firm foundation had been laid for meeting the problems of agricultural growth in Kuria. As already indicated, arising political awareness characterised the emergence of a group of radical Kuria thinkers who challenged the continues underdevelopment of agriculture in Kuria. One example is the Kuria Member of Parliament, Samson Mwita Maroa, who in 1964 wrote to the District Agricultural Officer as follows: "... when visitors come to see places where rice can be grown they are taken to other parts of Nyanza but not Kuria. We are fed up being neglected in this manner".

In the same year, Farmers Training Centres had been built in several places in South Nyanza by the Ministry of Agriculture, however, Kuria was neglected. In this connection, Hon. Samson Mwita's memorandum further stated:

"... We feel dissatisfied with the Agriculture Department in the way it has distributed Farmers Training Centres in South Nyanza. If the government is to build one centre in Homabay (Luoland), it should build one in Kehancha (Bukuria), why should it be build at Oyani? (in Luoland)?"

As earlier discussed the colonial government had denied loans to Kuria farmers and Traders arguing that they made no profit. This practice continued even after independence. The memorandum touched this issue as it read:

"We would like to be given loan like other people for the development of our agricultural industry... we here in Kuria work so hard but

⁶ Ocheing, Wasiam R., *An Outline History of Nyanza up to 1914*, East African Literature Bureau, Nairobi, 1974.p.13

⁷ Ibid, p. 39

⁸ Ruel, 1959, p. 4

we are not known for any support... Our people cultivate more land than any other people in Nyanza but we are not given any help even when we ask for it".

The Kuria local council also played a vital role in post-independence Kuria agriculture. From time to time, the council sought to have men trained so that they could take up positions as extension officials. These efforts yielded results, especially when the Ministry of Agriculture sent circular to the Kuria ADC, stating:

"... After many years of hand-cultivation and use of ox-ploughs, it has become increasingly clear that these methods (Ox-ploughs) will not permit the full utilization of the potential of this District... You are therefore, invited to attend a seminar on mechanisation at Homabay on 24th July, 1964."

Following the circular, the council sent a special agricultural committee of four persons representing the four Kuria Locations to attend the seminar. There after two tractors were sent to the Kehancha Divisional headquarted and the four individuals were employed on return as Field Officers to aid people on tractor hire services and to encourage the use of it.

The year 1965 was a very difficult year for all sectors of agriculture in Kuria. Nearly all areas had insufficient rain and the shortages almost reached drought proportions. The consequence of this was a marked fall in the output of subsistence food crops and a significant decrease in the output of nearly all major cash enterprises, notably coffee and dairy products. However, a few coffee nurseries were established at Nyabohanse in Nyabasi, Mahuntuntu in Bukira and Kwigancha in Bugumbe close to the rivers which had survived the dry period. Further demonstrations on Coffee growing techniques were organised, especially at Nyabosongo. Four more people, E. Munemi, Saulo Munyoro, Benedicto Macherera and James Wankyo were taken by the Ministry of Agriculture for a training course on coffee at Kisii Farmers Training Centre. They were later assigned to manage and supervise coffee growing in Kuria.

However, coffee growing continued to face various problems. The most serious one was the coffee berry disease, an anthracnose organism which causes lesions and fruit shrinkage. Although this disease had even been successfully controlled in many areas by spraying, in the later years it was still severely reducing production, especially in Bwirege. At worst, it could diminish a crop by as much as ninety percent. Another problem affecting coffee growing was quality control. With a relatively small number of growers all cultivating young trees, staff funds were cut and factory management at Nyabosongo deteriorated and quality dipped. In 1964/65, only 26.30 percent of the total crop was in the top three classes and less than 0.2 per cent was in class .

The most striking change in land use and crop production during the post-independence period had been the move towards individual holdings supported by documentary title. In 1967, for example, the demand for land consolidation and issues of titles increased, but now prompted perhaps by the fear that Bukuria would be left behind the rest of South Nyanza and in the hope that the titles would automatically mean government loans. In Bugumbe, 16 plots totalling to about 171 hectares were surveyed while several farm enclosures of 16 farms totalling to 320 hectares in Kehancha and Between 300-620 hectares surveyed in Bwisaboka.

The pressure to enter trade as a potentially profitable venture, was so great in post-independence kuria that large numbers of people entered with the result that opportunities soon become limited. Even with the coming of independence, however, the basic situation of a large number of small-scale business with a preponderance of Asian traders in towns continued unaltered. Asians owned wholesale business from which the Kuria small scale traders often got their stocks.

In the 1964, the Kuria ADC approved the establishment of many more trading centres. These included Masangora, Nyamosense, Kugitimo, Kogetontira, Masebe and Nyametaburo. At the same time Nyanza Provincial Marketing board continued to increase its activities in Kuria. As it was stated in the Boards statutes:

"...a system of organised marketing boards can perform a very important development function in providing the means whereby a large scattered peasant population can sell crop surpluses no matter what small quantity."

The Board provided crop inspection services, gunny bags, and transport services to Kuria traders. In October 1964, Maisori Itumbo became the agent of the Marketing Board in kuria and was given 1,500 gunny bags for the storage of maize and other grain. In August 1965, the Board bought a total of 495,515 bags of maize from African growers in South Nyanza, the largest share coming from "South Nyanza border market" (referring to kuria)

A major factor that enhanced Kuria participation in trade after independence was the need for money for education for their children. Consequently, by this time, many Kuria families looked upon education as the most important economic alternative to Agriculture. Cattle and grain were sold, mainly to meet the school fees expenditure.

In 1968, the relationship between the kuria and the Maasai become hostile. This resulted in the closure of the trading centres of Lolgorien, Angata Baragoi and Masurura. These centres had hitherto provided cattle

trading opportunities for both communities. As a consequence of the hostile relationship, prominent cattle traders in the Bugumbe and Bukira namely Bwiro Sabora, Chacha Kerata, Simion Robi and Mwitira Rasimi - changed their Maasai trading partners and began selling their cattle in Kisumu. This they did by waling cattle, stopping at Oyugis, Ahero and Sondu to purchase more cattle from the Luo, and subsequently sell them at a profit in Kisumu. On coming back, they would buy paraffin, books and stationary for sale in Kuria.

The economic growth of kuria with the markets as a focal point can best be measured by the investment into which the traders ploughed their profits. Of the 13 most successful business men in Bukuria four had carefully invested in motor vehicle totalling some Shs. 100,000/=; Seven invested in land amounting to Shs. 30,000/=; two built for themselves permanent houses at a cost of almost Shs. 80,000. Thus, between 1963 and 1969, some prominent businessmen has made a profit of and invested over Shs. 250,000/=.

Despite the introduction of cash crops and supposedly better methods of farming, not all areas of kuria witnessed a significant changes in production during these years. Most former traders interviewed agreed that the worst years had been those immediately after independence. The production was low at that time, because few people really got involved in the cultivation of land. This of course, meant that there was relatively little money on circulation. This meant low purchasing power traders who in turn returned to the land for subsistence. Co-operative Movements in Kuria fuelled political awareness and had played an increasingly prominent role particularly in Marketing and processing in the late 1950s. In Kuria, the growth of the co-operative movements was greatly aided by the insistence of the colonial government that all potential growers join co-operative societies before obtaining permission to plant coffee.

Kuria farmers joined co-operative societies in order to obtain credit and invest savings; Provide themselves with tools or implements; and process and market their produce. In 1963, the Bugumbe Farmers Co-operative Society was formed by Joseph Magige, the Chief of Bugumbe Location. Farmers came together and, through collective bargaining, they could earn more from the sale of coffee. Later, other societies were formed in the coffee growing areas Gitungi, Nyabikondo, Mahuntutu and Nyabsongo.

In 1964, officers of the Ministry of Labour visited the Bugumbe Farmers Co-operative Society to advise and teach co-operative management skills. The members of the Society chose six of themselves to train in Kisumu under the sponsorship of the Ministry. At the same time, the Minister for Labour and Social Services, Tom Mboya, visited Taranganya and Ntimaro to check developments of the co-operative societies and self help

groups of the area. In late 1964, he visited the Masaba, Tebesi, Isibania, Ikerege and Nyabohanse self-help groups

Politicians played a significant role in support of these co-operative groups. For example Maisori Itumbo assisted the Bwirege co-operative Society to obtain 1,000, being a loan from the government for the construction of a health centre at Ntimaru. On the whole farmers' Co-operatives played an important role in facilitating the transition to a more commercial or market-oriented agriculture. They provided the marketing link between individual farmers and the National Marketing Organisations.

Crucial to the economic success and rapid diffusion of Kuria Coffee was the Bugumbe Farmers Co-operative Society. It had supervised the planting cultivation, processing, transportation and marketing of all Coffee grown in Bukuria since 1955. Commencing as a loose cooperative comprising three factories and 350 growers, It eventually expanded to six constituent societies. As a powerful economic force in Kuria, the society opened the doors of a new office building and general headquarters at Maberu in 1967. However, this and other societies faced many problems since most Abakuria were inexperienced in the management of such Co-operatives. Indeed, Kuria were driven by the desire to control their own affairs and their economic destiny. However, they faced officials from the Department of Agriculture with whom they differed occasionally. Despite management problems and considerable internal conflicts, it may still be said that without the power and organisation of these societies, the production of coffee would not have been a success in Kuria.

After independence, the Kuria began to focus on land reforms which had already been applied in a number of other areas of Kenya. Kuria attention had for a long time been riveted mainly to the problem of land tenure and change wrought by population increase. Thus the land reforms were to represent a promise of security of tenure through a title which could be used as collateral in securing agricultural loans.

In 1963, enclosure continued to spread fast in kuria in response to land scarcity. This was accelerated when the agricultural Officials provided sisal plants for hedging. Not being edible by stock, sisal could form an excellent fence against straying cattle and also sometimes serve as an erosion barrier. Besides this, the plant produces poles which could be used for building and fencing and fibre for weaving; this was undoubtedly appreciated by the kuria.

In 1965, there were still many Kuria resisting land consolidation. When this was reported to the Divisional Agricultural Committee, the latter recommended that the government force people to consolidate their farms since this was "obviously to their

advantage". The committee also passed a resolution that no loans would be given to people who had not consolidated their holdings.

The anticipation of consolidation and registration created an unprecedented amount of litigation over land, as lineages attempted to maximise their holding as the expense of others. For example, the majority of the 200 civil cases (including land, divorce and theft), heard in the Suba-Kuria District Court in the period from March to October 1967 were case of land disputes between family members. The value of land was constantly rising and it was becoming a commodity just like labour which could be bought for money. Land consolidation made farming management more efficient; it facilitated the use of animal manure for improvement of crops and disease control; and, it opened new source of credit from private banks.

In July 1967, the Agriculture Department in Homa Bay conducted a farm survey in Bukuria as follow up on the land consolidation. This effort stemmed from awareness that the Ministry needed to understand the problems of the small farmers so as to protect their economic status. Meetings were held at various administrative centres to explain to the interested parties the nature of survey. Also, Chiefs were asked to help by listing the names of small farmers living within the areas of their jurisdiction.

In early, 1969, the Maberu Sub location of Bugumbe location was declared on adjudication section with boundaries running from Ragana bridge, ascending westwards towards Renchoka Hill and curving northwards to Kwigancha Stream. Under this declaration, all land within the said boundaries was to be consolidate and enclosed, and titles obtained proof of ownership.

In October, of the same year, the Land Adjudication officer appointed the Land Adjudication Committee whose Chairman was Joram Mosoba, Vice-chairman John M. Wang'ang'a, and Kombo Mwita being a member. The purpose of the Committee was to advise the on the consolidation process. By way of promoting land reforms in Bukuria, the then Minister for Economic Planning and Development, T.J. Mboya, visited Kehancha and spent several days in Bugumbe and Bukira. He toured selected enclosed farms in the two locations and gave remuneration for good work done.

Late in December, a large number of Maragoli, Kikuyu and Abagusii began migrating into Bukuria, especially Isibania, Nyamtiro and Masaba areas. They bought farms and obtained titles to the land. Others leased land for a period of time at a cost. Similarly, some Somali come-although they were mainly interested in trade and business-and they settled at Nyamtiro. The Kuria people became painfully aware of the finality of land registration which was completed with the issuance of title deeds.

Any casual visitor to Kuria at the end of the 1960s could not help but recognize the profound changes in the landscape which came in the wake of consolidation. The land was bared by the removal of trees, and an incongruous symmetry evolved as farms were demarcated by hedges, roads cut out, and new species of trees for windbreak planted. Changes in housing and settlement patterns were also stimulated by land consolidation. The indigenous cylindrical or conical houses were being replaced by rectangular ones with corrugated iron roofs construction of the latter being actively encouraged by government health authorities. Throughout the consolidated areas, angularization of plots led to the disintegration of the indigenous settlement patterns. And, under the new system of land use, animals were kept in separate sheds rather than in the circular animal compound located between the houses as was the practice in earlier times.

Another significant changes was that, instead of each farming unit occurring several ecological zones, individual farms were now restricted to one zone. Consequently, regional specialisation began to occur. This was especially the case with most cash crops which usually grew in the upper altitudes. Lastly, new relations of agrarian production emerged on the consolidated farms. Farms task now shifted increasingly to the male as he become an active participant in all stages of crop production. No doubt, because such participation was facilitated by having the entire farm located together in one place.

Bitter complaints arose, however regarding the issuance of hawking licences by the County Council. Traders Complained that the licences had denied them opportunities as they were required for trade on everything unlike before, when the requirement for licensing was restricted to second-hand clothes only. An appeal by traders who were choosing to quash the licences failed since hawkers sold their Merchandise cheaply. During the year, Barclays Bank opened a fulltime branch in Homa Bay and served traders who previously had to seek such services in Kisii. Up to the end of the Period of our study, there were no Banks in Kuria.

In December 1975, it was accounted for that "Kuria has a tobacco blast" and that tobacco was a developing industry in the Division, where numerous hectares of land had been put under the yield. Amid these years, feeder streets were developed to interface all tobacco developing zones of Bukuria. These were expected to encourage the transportation of relieved tobacco to Leaf Center particularly Nyabohanse and Taranganya. In closing this dicussion, it might evenhandedly be said that no other advancement in Kuria agribusiness in the post-autonomy period had a more prominent effect than the improvement of tobacco as a money trim. The issues of value the executives, models of development, transport, showcasing and the restoring of

the product unmistakably demonstrate that tobacco is a work escalated trim. First experience with Bukuria improved the investment of men in harvest creation instead of creature farming just like the case up to this point. This change modified the indigenous Kuria cultivating rehearses under which ladies were the cultivators.

Notwithstanding these disasters, regardless, the advancement of tobacco in like manner accomplished different positive changes to kuria. For one, it made a rich class of people who obtained cars and lorries; others presented grain pulverizing machines and acquired survey steers. These individuals included Gesabo Mwita, Maisori Itumbo, Mwita Nyagakende and Maroa Wantera to make reference to a couple. The Abakuria used the money gained from the offer of tobacco to purchase wrinkles and other property inputs. In that capacity, tobacco creation acknowledged mechanical and specific improvements in the yield age. In such manner, the B.A.T. Association bolstered farmers, who therefore obtained tractors and various wrinkling executes. Eventually, it should be seen that the occurrence to tobacco to kuria did not decrease vitality for coffee creating - anyway this last gather was not as productive as tobacco.

For Kuria the period some place in the scope of 1980 and 1990 were a period of fiscal impact. The domain focused on tobacco improvement in the Kuria climbed basically in the midst of the period 1975 to 1985. For whatever time allotment that there was a predictable enthusiasm for tobacco on the planet feature the laborers had the capacity to recognize great pay from its improvement. Dairy animals ended up being uncommon, the Kuria.

CONCLUSION

In the midst of discussions about the role of peasants in a capitalistic economy, the case of the tobacco growers in the Kuria region provides fresh perspectives to Kenyan historiography and the 'Kenya Debate'. For instance, we learn from this case that through subsistence agriculture, the Kuria peasants were able to influence the development of rural society, despite the local elite's and state's pressure. Through this study, we also see that the relationship between peasantries and capitalistic markets is active and complex. The peasants who were successful in withstanding state or market pressure were the ones who successfully held onto their land. This economic autonomy was the key to their success within the subsistence economy. It is important to mention that the Kuria peasantry was a socially and politically weak class. Their degree of autonomy was guaranteed only if they could play different elite factions against each other. Therefore, we can say that to some degree elite groups were allies, as well as potential oppressors, for the peasantry.