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The Role of Pre-Colonial Agikuyu Women's Local Trade on Indigenous Food Crops and Food Security in Nyeri County Before 1902

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Keywords:

Pre-Colonial,
Agikuyu Women,
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Food Security.

The purpose of this paper was to establish the role of pre-colonial Agikuyu women's local trade on indigenous food Crops in enhancing food security in Nyeri County before 1902. The research was guided by two theories Marxist feminist theory and articulation theory. This study was conducted in three sub-counties: Kieni East, Mathira East, and Nyeri Central. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources such as key informants, archival data and document analysis. A sample size threshold of 54 respondents was interviewed. The main research instruments were the interview guide and focus group discussion. Data for this study was analyzed qualitatively using documentary content analysis, description and narration of the historical events. Data was also corroborated and both context and content analysis were done to ensure reliability and validity of the information. The study established that in pre-colonial period women formed the backbone of Nyeri County's food security through their local exchange system leveraging their deep understanding on well-established trade networks of indigenous food crops that helped to mitigate food shortage. The established that the indigenous food crops that women exchanged in the local markets were well adapted to local conditions, sustainably available and provided essential nutrients necessary for the health and well-being of the community. The findings of this study illustrate the pivotal role of Agikuyu women in local trade systems and its substantial contribution to food security in Nyeri County. The study concludes that the ministry of trade should come up with deliberate measures that will integrate women's local trade into the country's economic policies and practices and also consider the valuable contribution of women local trade in mitigating food shortage and ensuring eradication of extreme poverty and hunger.

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INTRODUCTION

Trade on indigenous food crops has been vital because indigenous food crops serve as a symbol of heritage, trademark, and culture in many societies. Besides offering an important opportunity to diversify the food base, it also enhances the social-economic status of many societies in the world. Nevertheless, there has been increasing suffering from food shortages from time to time. According to UN reports, women participation in trade has often been ignored denying them access to resources, credit and training. Also, it can be argued that women work for longer hours as compared to men, but earn less and their work and opinions are undervalued (UN, 2019). On the other hand, women face obstacles to holding position of authority and may be exposed to threats of violence.

The research on the women's trade on indigenous food crops and its effect on food security have attracted the attention of different scholars for a long time; thus, there have been several research in different geographical regions and times. According to Kuczynski (1983), one of the most celebrated indigenous crops of the Americas is the potato, renowned for its origin in the Andean region of South America. Indigenous women in the Andes played a pivotal and multifaceted role in the cultivation, preservation, and trade of various potato varieties. Their expertise in selecting, breeding, and safeguarding diverse potato strains not only contributed to food security but also upheld cultural traditions and biodiversity in the region. Additionally, these women engaged in local and regional trade networks, enhancing

the exchange of knowledge and resources across the Andean highlands

In Yoruba societies, women are offered the greatest opportunities to participate in economic activities such as manufacturing and trade. Among the Yoruba, the responsibility of a woman is to provide material resources and care for her family. Similar to the practice among the Yoruba, the Agikuyu women traded in indigenous food crops which helped to improve the status of their society. This information detailing how many women were involved in trade has not been well documented beyond the locality of homes. Yoruban women, for example, were the central figures in long-distance trade. They amassed enormous wealth and held prominent titles Hafkin (2018).

As scholars of Africa continue to challenge the place and role of Africa in world history, shedding light on women as valid historical actors in postcolonial Africa within the last three decades remains an ongoing and much-needed endeavor. African women in the past and the present have used their position as breadwinners, mothers, and community leaders to influence their social, economic, and political worlds and to assert their power Oyewùmí (2015). Women had numerous important roles and functions to carry out, many of which conferred a great deal of power and respect to them

Much has been written about trade and markets in indigenous Africa, but dismissively. For a variety of reasons, it has been argued that trade and markets could not have developed in Africa. For one thing household subsistence agriculture was assumed to be the norm. Surplus produce therefore was unavailable to trade. For another

climatic conditions posed grave problems of storage and technical difficulties seriously hampered bulk transportation of goods. And “for those who do not believe that traditional African societies had market systems suggest that evidence of such systems is a reflection of colonial and Western contact especially in the last hundred years” (Schneider, 1986) yet trade and markets of indigenous food crops were there and they played a significant role in enhancing food security.

Statement of the Problem

In many African societies women organized themselves as key participants in the socio-economic development of their societies through trade on different indigenous food crops. In particular, the traditional Agikuyu women of Nyeri were involved in the local trade systems on indigenous crops which enabled them to distribute surplus food crops as a way of improving their economic status and food security in the households. However, with the introduction of colonial economic system new pattern of trade system and strategies emerged particularly in the local trading areas and this trend continued even after independence. These new patterns of the local trade systems led to abandonment of some important aspects of traditional women's local trade on indigenous food crops and others were incorporated in the modern economic system. This alteration may have also undermined women's role in elevating food security in Nyeri County. Despite the existence of partial studies on women trade on indigenous food crops the changes in the Agikuyu women's trade system in indigenous food crops and how it affected food security in the area have had not received historical investigation and documentation. It is for this reason therefore that I examined and documented these changes overtime on the Agikuyu women's local trade in indigenous crops in Nyeri County and also assessed on how the new pattern of the Agikuyu women's trade in indigenous food crops affected the food security in the area. This makes a key contribution to the economic history of Kenya and also helps us

understand the role that women played in enhancing food security in their society.

Purpose of the Study

The study analyzed the history of the Agikuyu women's local trade system in indigenous food crops and its effects on food security in Nyeri County before 1902

Research Questions

How did the pre-colonial Agikuyu women's local trade in indigenous food crops influence food security in Nyeri prior to 1902?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Location of the Study

Nyeri county is located in the fertile central highlands meaning that the county is highly productive with high annual rainfall and moderate temperatures. The county is also home to Mount Kenya and Aberdare National Parks which are key tourist attractions. Mount Kenya is the highest mountain in East Africa and the second highest in Africa. The administrative center of the county is Nyeri central, the largest town in the county. The immediate occupants of the area of study currently occupied by the Agikuyu were the Athi and Gumba. The Agikuyu being mixed farmers needed land for cultivating and as such they negotiated with the Athi and Gumba who were hunters and gatherers.

Research Design

This study employed historical research design based on qualitative procedures to examine change in the Agikuyu Women's local trade in indigenous food crops before 1902 to 1980 in Nyeri County. This study design was useful and it assisted the researcher in collecting data through reaching out key to informants in order to come up with well summarized, interpreted and clarified in-depth analysis of the subject. This design was focused on the use of primary and secondary data and was instrumental in chronologizing of events. The research utilized a historical research design which involves collecting, verifying and synthesizing evidence from past event to establish

facts that defend or refute assumptions (Creswell, 2008).

Target Population

The whole of Nyeri County has a population of 759,164 people according to (KNBS, 2019) while the subject of the study was drawn from three sub-counties which include Kieni East, Mathira East and Nyeri Central Sub Counties. The informants were drawn from people who were aged 55 years and above, in the three sub-counties. The target population included political, religious leaders, Farmers, traders and former Administrators i.e. the colonial chiefs, and headsmen. This group of the population was very important since they were bearing the most relevant information to the study.

Sampling Procedures

The study sampled three sub-counties from Nyeri county, that is Mathira East sub-county, Kieni East sub-county and Nyeri Central sub-county. The three sub-counties have been sampled purposively on the ground that Mathira East had the largest open-air market in East and central Africa which dates back to the colonial period and most of the trade items were local food stuffs. Kieni East being a semi-arid area experienced frequent food shortages since colonial times and women were forced to participate in local trade on Indigenous food crops in order to feed their families while Nyeri Central was mainly the administrative centers during the colonial period and even today it's the main administrative and economic center for Nyeri County. In addition, Nyeri Central and Mathira East sub-counties had a higher colonial penetration compared to the others due to their location in Upper Highland zone which was highly fertile, with plenty of rainfall that was reliable for food crop production. There was high concentration of colonial reserves, Villages and settlement schemes. Nyeri Central was the home of the earliest Consolata Missionaries to arrive in Kenya and they settled at a place called Mathari.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The aim of data analysis is basically to decipher meanings and understanding from the texts. Data collected from oral sources was digitally recorded and transcribed from Agikuyu into English. The similarities and differences in the oral information gathered were noted for easier categorization into themes and sub-themes according to the objectives of the study and the historical period concerned. Similar information from secondary data was subjected to textual criticism to establish their accuracy. Analysis involves interpreting the findings from the themes and sub-themes through description, narration, comparisons and critical evaluations. A relationship between the themes was sought before drawing conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained research authorization from Chuka University, National Commission for Science Technology and Innovation, Ministry of Education State Department for Early Learning and of Basic Education, the County Commissioner, and Nyeri County. The authorization assisted the researcher to carry out research work in Nyeri and other relevant institutions. The researcher sought oral permission from all the informants who participated voluntarily in the interviews. The informants were informed about the purpose of the research being carried out to allay any fears that could have arisen from the exercise. The data they provided was treated with the confidentiality it deserved and their right to privacy was respected too.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Agikuyu women had an understanding about foods produced with less risk of crop failure in other ecological zones (Martha, 2019). This enabled them to provide market with varieties of foods. This knowledge had given them the level of negotiation power that also connected them to the traditional political economies of their societies as production input actors. At the same time, the division of labor according to gender culminated in Agikuyu women's empowerment in terms of economic independence (Mpara et al.,

2012). Local trade was previously an essential pillar of the economy of the Agikuyu women before colonialism. In most markets, indigenous food crops were traded for iron, pottery, leather clothes, salt, and red ochre. Naomi Karanja (O. I., 2024) stated that the Kikuyu blacksmiths (muturi) made knives and weapons from metal ore that was picked out of the earth and melted down. Making baskets (kondo) used to be highly esteemed among women of Agikuyu by their people for as many reasons as those mentioned above, like weaving, snaring, making, repairing calabashes, stringing beads, or storing loads (Onyango et al., 2018).

The Agikuyu people had a wide range of food for local trade and many were drought-tolerant foods that could stay in the market for several days without getting spoiled as noted by Gitonga Nancy (O.I., 2024). The Agikuyu women's contribution to food crop production is of utmost importance in determining the family's position in society and the husband's position in society (Njaramba, 1978). In sum, the pre-colonial Agikuyu was a very vibrant trading society where women were an essential part of local trade that was going on, where they applied understanding in every detail to ensure food security through the exchange system. This is in line with Marxist Feminism theory that despite the patriarchal society that Agikuyu women were living in, they were able to carry out trade and sustain their families.

Influence of Physical Environment in Agikuyu Settlements and Economy

Before colonialism, the physical environment played a significant role in shaping Agikuyu settlements and the economy. The Agikuyu people, residing in areas like Nyeri County, had a deep connection to their land and environment, influencing their practices and economic activities as it is noted by Kamau Wanjiru (O., I 2024). The Agikuyu settlements were strategically located in areas with fertile soils and favorable climatic conditions for crop cultivation (Njaramba, 1978). They practiced mixed farming, keeping livestock and cultivating various indigenous food crops for

trade like sorghum, millet, sweet potatoes, cassava, and yams, which were well-suited to their environment. The physical environment also influenced the economic activities of the Agikuyu people. The availability of fertile land and a suitable climate allowed them to engage in cultivation as their primary economic activity hence the items of trade were always available (Nyakwaka, 2013).

Lyndia Ndia (O.I., 2024) explains that Nyeri is located in the central highlands of Kenya. A fertile landscape with rich volcanic soils and a moderate climate characterizes it. These favorable conditions made the region suitable for agronomy and trade, which was the primary occupation of the Agikuyu people. The physical environment influenced settlement patterns, as families and communities tended to establish their homes in areas where the soil was most fertile, and water sources were readily available. The Agikuyu women's daily activities were closely tied to these settlement patterns (Nyakwak, 2013). Proximity to rivers and streams was particularly important, as water was essential for both household use and crop irrigation. The availability of fertile land enabled women to grow a variety of crops for consumption and also for local trade and this ensured food security. Settlements were typically organized in a dispersed manner, with homesteads surrounded by family-owned farms.

According to Nyakwaka (2013), the climate of Nyeri, with its seasonal variations, profoundly impacted the economic activities of Agikuyu women. During periods of adequate rainfall, productivity was high, resulting in surplus produce that women could sell or trade in local markets. This surplus was crucial for generating income and acquiring other necessary goods. Women often participated in local markets, selling crops, handmade crafts, and other products to support their households. One of the respondents revealed that,

The physical environment provided natural resources that were essential for the local trade handicrafts, another significant aspect of the Agikuyu women's economy. Women

collected materials such as clay for pottery, reeds and sisal for basket weaving, and beads for jewelry making. These handicrafts were used within the community and traded in local markets, providing an important source of income this was explained by one of the respondents (David Muchoki, O.I., 2024).

The availability and quality of these natural resources influenced the types and quantities of handicrafts that women could produce. For example, areas with abundant clay deposits supported a thriving pottery industry, while regions with ample vegetation enabled the production of high-quality woven baskets. The skills required to create these handicrafts were passed down through generations, ensuring that women remained proficient in their craft and could continue contributing to the local trade (Nyakwaka, 2013). Despite the challenges posed by the physical environment, Agikuyu women demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. They employed various strategies to sustain food security such as maximizing on production to ensure a constant supply of indigenous food crops for trade. Establishing women's groups and cooperative societies was crucial in adapting to the changing economic landscape. These groups facilitated sharing of resources, knowledge, and support, enabling women to navigate the challenges that were affecting local trade that time. By working together, women could pool their efforts to improve the productivity of indigenous food crops, and enhance their overall increase in availability of trading commodities which ensured economic resilience (Gakaria, 2015). The Marxist Feminism theory acknowledges the vital and undisturbed roles in ensuring sustainability in their community.

Methods of Acquiring Trade Commodities

The methods used by Agikuyu women in Nyeri to acquire trade commodities before colonialism was a combination of many factors and to cope with the unpredictable climate and ensure a stable supply of trade commodities the Agikuyu women diversified the types of crops they grew (Nderitu,

2018). They started cultivating a variety of crops, including drought-resistant ones to try and mitigate the risks associated with poor rainfall and prolonged droughts (World Food Program, 2016). This diversification strategy not only improved food security for their families but also provided a wider range of products for trade Nangulu (2001). By having different crops ready for sale at different times, women could maintain a steady presence in the local markets hence ensuring a continuous flow of goods to trade (Swaison, 1976). In addition to indigenous food crops, the Agikuyu women produced handicrafts and home-made goods that were valuable trade commodities. These included pottery, woven baskets, beadwork, and traditional clothing (Uzoigwe, 1975).

Another method of obtaining trading commodities to supplement indigenous food crops was through gathering and foraging whereby the Agikuyu women collected wild fruits, herbs and other natural resources from their environment (Acker, 1973). These items were often used for medicinal purposes as food supplements or as materials for crafting (Kigwe, 2016). Foraging provided a way to supplement household resources and offered additional items that could be traded in local markets (Grey & Patel, 2015). This method was particularly useful when production was insufficient to meet the community's needs and Barter was a common method of trade among the Agikuyu women (Nzioki, 2000).

Women exchanged surplus produce with goods or items they needed but did not produce themselves as it is noted by George Maingi (O.I., 2024):

Women built and maintained trade networks within and between communities, facilitating the exchange of goods and ensuring a diverse range of products was available in local markets

Cooperative efforts played a significant role for acquisition of trade commodities because women often worked together in groups to pool their trading resources (Gathigi, 2000). These

cooperative groups were sometimes based on family ties or community affiliations and collaborated on larger projects such as preparing fields and harvesting crops (Gakaria, 2015). By working together these women could achieve higher productivity and generate more surplus produce for trade said by (Vivian Kabui O.I., 2024). Cooperative groups also provided a support network that helped women to share knowledge, resources and strategies for improving their economic activities (Wriggley, 1965).

Active participation in local markets was essential for acquiring and trading commodities. Women traveled to local markets regularly to sell indigenous food crops and other goods (Wolff, 1974). These markets were vibrant and economic activity centers where women could interact with traders, exchange goods and acquire new commodities (Kanyinga, 2017). He adds that Market participation facilitated the sale of their products and provided opportunities to learn about new trade items and market trends. Social structures such as clans and age-set systems supported women's efforts in acquiring trade commodities (Wriggley, 1965). These structures organized economic activities ensured that resources were shared fairly within the community and clans provided a sense of identity and mutual support that was crucial for collaborative efforts in trade. The age-set systems grouped individuals into cohorts that moved through stages of life together reinforcing cooperation and shared responsibilities as stated by (Peris Wanjiku O.I., 2024).

These social frameworks enabled women to access indigenous food crops for trade and the support needed for their economic activities (Wriggley, 1965). Information sharing and education were vital for women to adapt to changing economic conditions and improve their methods of acquiring trade commodities while older women passed down trading techniques, crafting skills and strategies to younger generations (Kilonzo & Akallah, 2021). This transmission of knowledge ensured that women remained capable and innovative in their trading

activities (Wriggley, 1965). All these methods of acquiring trade items made women ensure there was food security in their homes.

Gender Roles in Agikuyu Local Trade

The role of gender in trade among the Agikuyu before colonialism in Nyeri, Kenya, is characterized by the significant participation of women in barter trade, with men serving as escorts to facilitate trade activities. This dynamic highlights women's economic agency and autonomy in the pre-colonial era, where they played a crucial role in the community's economic life (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2013).

Gitonga Nancy (O.I., 2024) noted that the fact that women dominated the barter trade and men acted as escorts suggests that women were not only involved in trade but also had a level of control and authority in this sphere which is a testament to their economic power and influence. This means that women dominated the supply chain in the garden products and grains market with some women becoming full-time grain market traders and they were referred to as the "big-time grain mamas" (Gitonga Nancy O.I., 2024). The history of women commuter traders in the present-day goes back to pre-colonial years when women from Central Kenya especially the Kikuyu developed trading networks Before colonial contact. The Agikuyu engaged in trade with neighboring groups and cattle-herding nomads, such as the Maasai exchanging goods like leather, gourds, and food (Musalia, 1985).

Women played a crucial role in local trade and they were the main traders in local markets selling goods they produced themselves which included indigenous food crops like millet, sorghum. They also sold vegetables and fruits and they were primarily responsible for farming so they had control over these products as noted by (Rachael Wangu O.I., 2024). In addition to food items, women also sold handicrafts, pottery and home-made woven items that were an important source of income for their families (Ochieng, 2014).

In the pre-colonial Agikuyu society, women played a central role in local trade and marketing which was a vital part of their community's economy. They were primarily responsible for growing and harvesting crops so they had control over the products that were sold in local markets. These products mainly were indigenous food crops such as millet, sorghum and cassava. Others included vegetables, fruits, and other food items that were essential for the community's daily meals as was explained by one of the respondents (James Kiragu O.I., 2024). The local markets were bustling places where women interacted, exchanged goods, and built social networks. Women's involvement in these markets meant they had significant economic power and they were the primary managers of the household economy and the main providers of food and essential goods for trade (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2013). This economic role extended to managing surplus production, ensuring that their families had enough to eat and that there was extra to trade or sell and the income generated from these activities helped to support their families and contributed to the community's overall prosperity (Vivian Kabui O.I., 2024). Women's local trade activities also fostered a sense of community and mutual support, as they often collaborated with other women shared resources, and helped each other in times of need. Through their trading activities, women maintained and strengthened social bonds ensuring the stability and cohesion of their community.

Moreover, the markets were spaces where women could gain information, share news, and discuss matters affecting their lives and families. This informal exchange of information and ideas was crucial for the community's social and economic resilience. Women's roles in local trade was supported by the community's social structures, including age-set systems and clans that organized and regulated economic activities (Musalia, 1985). These structures ensured that women's contributions were recognized and valued and the complementary roles of men and women in the economy created a balanced system where both

genders played an essential part in sustaining the community Wanjiru Nduta (O.I., 2024) notes that,

While men engaged in long-distance trade to bring in resources from other regions, women's local trade ensured that the community's immediate needs were met and this balance was critical for the Agikuyu's economic stability and growth for food security purposes.

Even though their roles were different the economic activities of men and women were interdependent and both were necessary for the community's well-being. Women's active participation in local trade on indigenous food crops gave them a degree of autonomy and influence within the society. Their ability to generate income and manage resources gave them economic independence and a voice in household and also in community decisions (Ochieng, 2014). This economic empowerment was essential for maintaining gender balance and ensuring women's perspectives and needs were considered in the community's development and it also fostered food security stated (Ng'anga wa Karanja, O.I., 2024). Reports that women's roles in local trade and markets were fundamental to the pre-colonial Agikuyu economy and their control over local trade also their ability to produce and sell handicrafts and how they managed their household resources made them key in ensuring food security (Philip, 2013).

Pre-Colonial Women Economic Management of Local Trade

Within their households, women managed resources carefully and they ensured their families had enough food and goods for daily use and a surplus to trade. This management extended to local markets where women's economic activities significantly influenced their communities. Women held substantial economic power by controlling the production and sale of certain goods. This influence helped maintain the balance and stability of the community's economy (Felister Wambugu, O.I., 2024).

In pre-colonial Agikuyu society of Nyeri, women played a crucial role in economic management. For their community's sustainability and prosperity, they were the primary managers of household resources, overseeing the production, storage and distribution of food and other essential goods (Brett, 1973). They cultivated indigenous food crops ensuring their families had enough to eat and to sell in local trade and after harvesting women would carefully store surplus produce to prevent spoilage and for use during lean periods explained by (Jane Wokabi O.I., 2024). This careful management of food supplies was essential for the community's survival, particularly during times of drought or poor harvests. In addition to managing food supplies, women were responsible over other household goods and resources. They produced and maintained essential items like cooking utensils, woven baskets, and clothing. Women also engaged in various crafts, creating items such as pottery and beadwork, which they could sell or trade-in local markets. This production of goods not only fulfilled the needs of their households but also provided additional sources of income hence continuous food security (Mwangi, 1954).

The income generated from these activities allowed women to purchase items that were not produced locally, such as salt, iron tools, and luxury goods (World Food Program, 2016). By trading surplus indigenous food crops and handmade items, women contributed significantly to the household economy ensuring that their families had the necessary resources to thrive and this economic contribution gave women a degree of economic independence and influence within their households. Women's economic management extended beyond their own families (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2013).

They often collaborated with other women in their community, by sharing resources, labor and knowledge, especially in the area of trade. This cooperation increased productivity and strengthened social bonds within the community (Gitonga Nancy, O.I., 2024). Moreover, women played a key role in teaching and passing essential economic skills to the next generation. Mothers

taught their daughters how to cultivate crops, manage household resources, and produce goods for trade. This transmission of information ensured that economic practices were maintained and adapted over time contributing to the community's long-term sustainability and also food security (Taylor, 1979).

The community's social structures, such as age-set systems and clans supported women's economic management. These structures provided a framework for organizing trading activities and ensuring that resources were fairly distributed as said by one of the respondents (Elizabeth Nyambura O.I., 2024). They also facilitated cooperation and mutual support among community members hence reinforcing the importance of women's roles in economic management. Kamau Wanjiku (O.I., 2024) further notes,

Women's roles in economic management were not only about practical tasks but also involved decision-making. Women often had a say on how household resources were used and how surplus goods were traded or sold. so women familiarity of household needs and local market conditions made them valuable advisors in economic decisions.

This influence extended to community-level discussions where women's voices were important in shaping economic strategies and priorities. Their economic activities were interdependent with those of men. While men engaged in long-distance trade and brought in resources from other regions, women ensured that these resources were effectively utilized and managed within the community (Wasson & Roszak, 1969). This complementary relationship between men's and women's economic roles created a balanced system supporting the community's well-being. Even as colonial influences began to impact Agikuyu society, the foundational principles of women's economic management played a significant role (Dorine Wangui, O.I 2024). Although new economic pressures and opportunities always emerged, the skills and practices that women had developed

over generations remained crucial for adapting to changing circumstances and ensuring food security.

Mastery of seasons change and its effects on trading commodities.

Kamau Wanjiku (O.I., 2024) states that climate change significantly impacted trading commodities and food security in Nyeri County particularly affecting the indigenous food crops traded by Agikuyu women. Before 1902, the region experienced noticeable shifts in weather patterns including erratic rainfall, prolonged droughts and unpredictable seasons which disrupted trade dynamics. These changes posed substantial challenges to the cultivation, harvesting, and trade of indigenous food crops, which were crucial for local food security. The traditional calendar which was well understood and utilized by Agikuyu women was thrown into disarray by these climatic shifts. The predictability of seasons that once guided planting and harvesting schedules became unreliable leading to frequent crop failures and reduced items of trade (Nderitu, 2018).

Before the colonial era, the Agikuyu women had established a sustainable system of trade that prioritized indigenous food crops. They played a central role in this system, utilizing their knowledge of local environmental conditions and trading practices. They managed the cultivation and trade of various indigenous food crops which were essential for the community's food security (Wriggley, 1965).

The local trade practices of the Agikuyu were closely tied to their understanding of climate and weather patterns. Women relied on traditional knowledge to predict weather changes, plan planting seasons and manage crop for trade. This knowledge included observing natural indicators such as wind patterns, cloud movements, the positions of the stars and the moon and the behavior of animals and insects (Turner & Katherine, 2006). These indicators helped them anticipate weather changes and adjust their

farming and trading activities accordingly which was crucial for maintaining food security

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study on the history of the Agikuyu women's local trade system in indigenous food crops and their contribution to food security in Nyeri County by 1902 concludes that these women played an indispensable role in maintaining and enhancing food security through their trade practices. They effectively navigated these challenges by diversifying their trade activities and integrating new commodities into their trade practices introduced during the colonial period, while preserving the trade of indigenous food crops. This dual approach not only ensured the availability of food within their communities but also facilitated economic stability and empowerment. The post-independence era brought renewed opportunities through national development policies aimed at modernizing trade and improving market access. Agikuyu women capitalized on these opportunities by actively participating in cooperative societies and utilizing extension services to enhance their productivity and market reach. This participation was crucial in empowering them economically, improving household livelihoods, and contributing to community resilience though food insecurity has been a thorn issues in this society since the time of colonialism. The economic empowerment of these women had a transformative impact, enabling them to reinvest their earnings in essential services such as education and healthcare, thereby fostering broader social and economic development. Moreover, the study underscores the critical importance of trade in indigenous food crops in ensuring food security. These crops, were well-suited to local climatic conditions.

They required fewer inputs hence there was constant supply of trading commodities in the markets. The indigenous foods not only provided a reliable source of nutrition but also preserved

biodiversity and cultural heritage. The continued trade in indigenous crops was integral to sustaining food security, particularly in the face of environmental challenges and changing market dynamics. The ability of Agikuyu women to balance traditional trade practices with new economic realities highlights their key role in the community and the broader socio-economic landscape of Nyeri County. The study concludes that supporting and enhancing the role of women in trade of indigenous food crops is essential for sustainable food security and community development. Policies and programs that provide women with access to credit, training, and market information, as well as initiatives that promote the trade of indigenous crops, are vital. The findings underscore the need for a holistic approach that recognizes and strengthens the contributions of women to local economies and food systems. In essence, the study reaffirms that the resilience, adaptability, and economic agency of Agikuyu women were instrumental in navigating the socio-economic transformations of the 20th century, trying to ensure food security in Nyeri County. Their legacy offers valuable lessons for contemporary policy-making and development practices aimed at enhancing food security and women's empowerment.

Recommendations

- The government through the ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender affairs should document and keep records on women trade in indigenous food crops and how it mitigates food security. The information is easily accessible and it can be passed from one generation to another for proper consumption.
- The study also recommends that the relevance of trade in indigenous food crops should be integrated into the modern exchange pattern. This could go a long way towards realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on maintaining food security, Kenya's Vision 2030 and Constitution of Kenya 2010 that guarantee every person right to be free from hunger, and to have adequate food of acceptable quality in the modern society.
- The study recommends that the government should accept and recognize that women are important actors in sustaining socio-economic structures of their community and in mitigating society's challenges such as food scarcities in their society.

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