Subsistence to Cash: Economic Change in Rural Kiambu.
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Résumé

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Kiambu is the most southerly of the three Kenya Districts tradition-
ally inhabited by the Kikuyu group of Bantu peoples. Whilst the
history of population movements is not clear, there is little doubt that
Kiambu is the most recent area of Kikuyu settlement prior to the twen-
tieth century. Yet it is the most densely settled of the Kikuyu lands,
and population density in Kiambu is greater than in any other District
of Kenya. Although higher densities are found locally in western Kenya,
as in Vihiga Division of North Nyanza District, there is no other area
in which population pressure is so extensive as in Kiambu. The intro-
duction of a modern technology and economy by European immigrants
brought its own strains on tribal society, but at the same time provided
some economic outlets which are proving valuable in the relief of a number
of problems in Kiambu. For a variety of reasons, different parts of the
District have reacted to changing circumstances individually, and the
District is losing the economic and cultural homogeneity by which it was
formerly united. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate how
these changes have resulted in an inversion of economic status between
northern and southern Kiambu in the last fifty years.

Land and Population

The administrative District of Kiambu contains sixteen locations,
each of which is divided into sub-locations. There are fourteen locations
in which land is held freehold and a further two in which land is held
under lease from the District Council. For the purpose of this paper,
these two leasehold locations of Ndeiya and Karai will be omitted, since
they present rather special problems and are best considered as a unit
on their own in which physical and historical factors have created condi-
tions unique in the Kikuyu lands. The remaining fourteen locations
occupy the southern and south-eastern flanks of the Aberdare mountain
range and are bounded on the north by the Chania river, on the east by
the large farms of the former ‘White Highlands’, on the south by the
City of Nairobi and the Masai lands and on the west by the remnants of

Cahiers d'Études Africaines, 56, XIV-4, pp. 699-714.
the former forest cover in the south and the Aberdare Forest Reserve in the north. Projecting into this block of Kikuyu territory are the Limuru and Kiambu sections of the former ‘White Highlands’ (Fig. 1). In altitude, the District ranges from 5,200 feet on the south and east to over 7,500 feet in the north and west. The higher areas have appreciably lower temperatures and a heavier and more reliable rainfall. In these parts, the growing season is consequently shorter than in lower areas. Though essentially homogeneous in structure (some western areas are affected by the Rift fault zone), the northern parts of the District
are much more deeply incised by the parallel south-eastward-flowing rivers and are marked by greater relief than is found in the South. Rivers are more closely spaced, flat ridge tops narrower and valley slopes steeper. This bears directly upon the availability of land suitable to the practise of crop agriculture.

Crop agriculture is practised throughout the District, but lands below 6,500 feet are more suited to this type of farming, with the higher areas having a greater proportion of grazing land. Grazing is most extensive in the northern highlands where population densities are among the least acute in the District. Here, the lower temperatures and higher rainfalls give a declining yield from the staple crop, maize, and the banana fails to mature. Although high grade animals have recently been introduced, the majority of cattle are still of too poor quality to be considered as dairy animals and their major contribution to the local economy is through the sale of hides and skins. The introduction of commercial crops (tea and pyrethrum) suited to this altitude, but it is as yet too recent to have influenced population density: the main source of income remains charcoal, derived from the still extensive stands of wattle and gum. These trees are both introduced species which were planted extensively to give security of tenure at a time when many males, working away from home on plantations or in urban areas, could secure their land rights only through maintaining a crop on the land. Tree crops enjoyed considerable popularity for this purpose since they take ten years or more to mature. With the recent registration of freehold title following upon land consolidation, much of the social rationale for these crops has withered and the area of planted woodland is in decline. For historical reasons, densities in the western locations of Limuru and Lari are above the highland norm.

Population densities are higher in the lower areas, more suited to crop agriculture. Within these lower lands there is also a marked increase in density towards the south, where one small area has a density of almost 3,000 per square mile—equivalent to some urban densities in parts of Nairobi. Several explanations can be advanced for these greater southern densities. The greater availability of flat land may be thought to render the South a more desirable area for settlement. Again, the proximity of Nairobi could have attracted a migrant population to the South. Yet such explanations are at best partial; far more significant has been historical circumstance in the settlement of southern Kiambu.

History of settlement*

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Kiambu was densely forested and inhabited by the hunting and gathering Wandorobo people. To their

* This section relies heavily on an anonymous and untitled report in the library of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nairobi: Land Tenure File.
north, across the Chania river, lived the Kikuyu, in what is now Muranga District (formerly known as Fort Hall). The Wandorobo held their land in hunting ‘estates': *githaka*. Each family might have five or six such hunting grounds of three or four hundred acres each and widely scattered over the Kiambu forest lands. Thus the Wandorobo insured against fire, poor seasons and the migratory habits of the animals. Early in the last century, population pressures in the Kikuyu lands of Muranga were apparently such that the Kikuyu began to look southward, despite a taboo against the crossing of the Chania river. Their southward migration probably began with wealthy Kikuyu buying out Wandorobo hunting ‘estates’ and moving south over the Chania. Much Kikuyu wealth resided in livestock and surplus sheep were the medium used in purchases. It is said that the migration was at first slow, owing to the taboo. No misfortune beset the early settlers however, and a rationalised belief arose that God must have moved his residence from Mount Kenya—his traditional Kikuyu home well to the north—to the Ngong Hills, some way south of Kiambu. Be that as it may, the migration had apparently gathered momentum by mid-century, and by the end of the nineteenth century the migrants were penetrating the southernmost parts of the District.

It is likely that the vanguard of the migrants was drawn from two main classes of Kikuyu society. First the wealthy people, who would have the powers of leadership and the resources to purchase estates. From the Wandorobo point of view, since the purchase involved a form of adoption of the Wandorobo into the Kikuyu family, it was preferable to be adopted by an influential and wealthy family. Moving south with the wealthy migrants was a second group who provided the labour for forest clearance. These were the *ahoi* (sing. *muhoi*), a group who did not own land in Muranga, but who had cultivation and grazing rights through a tenancy system. Their ambition was always to accumulate sufficient wealth to be able to purchase their own family land, or *mbari*. They could do this by developing a herd of livestock sufficient to cover the purchase price. Apart from natural increase, the herd could be increased by lending animals to others for land purchase or other purposes. Thus during the migration the *muhoi* probably served the double function of labourer and money-lender. Of course the lending of livestock provided an insurance for the *muhoi* against disease and death among his herd. The rate of interest was high—100 per cent per annum, or the assumed rate of natural increase, which has elsewhere been termed ‘goat compound interest'. If the borrower was unable to repay in livestock, he might be forced to make good his debt in land. No doubt some of the *ahoi* achieved their object of land acquisition by one means or another and were left behind as the migration proceeded southwards. But large numbers of them were unsuccessful and continued southwards in search of further opportunity. Probably a leap-frog movement developed as new settlers by-passed the northern areas already occupied.
At much the same time as this wave of migration reached the most southern parts of the District, or slightly later, Europeans were also moving into southern Kiambu. Eventually, large tracts of land were alienated to these European settlers, driving a wedge into the areas of Kikuyu settlement. The migration was halted, and large numbers of *ahoi* settled in southern Kiambu.

It is to this historical circumstance that we must attribute much of the explanation for the currently high population densities in the South. What might otherwise have happened is speculation. The fact is that although formal recognition of a policy restricting African settlement was not given until much later, the British administration in Kenya effectively froze Kikuyu boundaries in 1902. The Crown Lands Ordinance of that year opened the way for European settlement and in so doing, stabilised the settlement in southern Kiambu of larger numbers than would have been considered desirable under the system of settlement which had been practised during the migration. The remaining forest frontier between Kikuyu and Masai, which might, under pressure, have absorbed some of the excess population, was closed to settlement by the establishment of the Muguga, Dagoretti and other forest reserves. And of course the density would have been less had the Kikuyu been permitted to occupy the lands alienated to European settlement. The combination of the restriction on available land and the nature of the Kikuyu economic and social systems together initiated a progressive divergence between northern and southern conditions of life and settlement.

*Traditional North-South Differences in Wealth*

Very real and demonstrable differences in economic status developed between northern and southern locations. From 1956 the land consolidation project provided a mass of information on farm size and related topics. Though recent, this information is here used in an attempt to demonstrate quantitatively the difference in economic status between a rich North and a poor South under the traditional concepts of wealth in terms of land. The question of status in the modern economy is deliberately left for later consideration, when it will be suggested that there has been an inversion of status between North and South under the influences of the modern economy.

2. The Crown Lands Ordinance, 1915, gave statutory recognition to a system of 'native reserves'. The reserve boundaries were not gazetted until 1926 and the final seal was not set upon the policy until the passing of the Native Lands Trust Ordinance in 1930. (For a resume, see 'East Africa Royal Commission 1953-1955 Report', Cmd 9475, HMSO 1955, pp. 18 ff.)
POPULATION

15 25 35 45

FREEHOLDS

<00

25 55

FREEHOLDS

BY SUB-LOCATION BY LOCATION

KEY

NORTHERN LOCATIONS

CHANIA
GITHUNGURI
GATAMAYU
NDARUGU
KIGANJO
KOMOTHAI
SATUNGU

SOUTHERN LOCATIONS

NDUMBERI
KIAMBAA
KABETE
LARI
LIMURU
MUGUSA
DAGORETTI

Figure 2
The historical sequence of settlement has resulted in greater and more rapid fragmentation of land in the South, and farm size is greater in north Kiambu. Two exceptions to this general rule may be noted. The location of Gatundu (formerly Ngenda) has a farm size more comparable with southern conditions. The reason is not clear, but it may be related to the impingement on drier margins or the proximity of Thika township. This implies recent migration and a commuter population attracted to the area by the work opportunities of Thika. The location's geographical boundaries are also in part responsible since, of all northern locations, Gatundu has the smallest altitudinal range, a smaller share of the less densely populated higher zone. Lari, which in population density is more akin to southern conditions, has an unexpectedly high farm size. This is probably due to the mechanism of settlement, for Lari was settled only in the mid 1930's when the authorities granted this land to the Kikuyu in settlement of their land claims following the Carter Commission. However Lari does not appear anomalous when the characteristic of population per farm is considered. If population is plotted against numbers of farms, a clear North-South distinction emerges (Fig. 2). Thus whilst population density and farm size suggest differences between North and South, the characteristic of population per farm even more clearly demonstrates the contrast.

These few factors alone are strongly indicative of a relatively poor South, but it will be found that in the South there is also a much higher proportion of small farms. Thus, whilst on average the South is relatively poorer, the position is more severe than has yet been indicated. Figure 3 shows the size distribution of farms. It will be seen that the proportion of large farms is generally higher in the North; conversely, in five southern locations some 60 per cent of farms are of under four acres. Nowhere is such a figure approached in the North, except again in the anomalous Gatundu. Accepting land to lie at the basis of traditional Kikuyu concepts of wealth, we have a picture of a rich North in which land is not so very short and a poor South where population density presses, farm size is small and the proportion of large farms is low.

Like all farmers, the Kikuyu were well aware of varying land quality and it might be thought that this would offset southern disadvantages. However, the quantity of land owned was generally more important than its quality except over small areas. And since through fragmentation most farms comprised a number of parcels of land, often scattered over wide areas, there was not the same feeling for farm quality as may be found for example in Europe. Further, quality tended to vary with altitude rather than latitude so that consciousness of regional variations

5. 'Report of the Kenya Land Commission'.
in quality was between high ground and low ground, rather than between North and South.

Southern poverty was aggravated by the higher proportion of landless males in the population. If every farm measured four acres, all northern locations except Gatundu could absorb the whole of their landless male population. In no southern location is this the case. The figure of four acres has been used because at the time of land consolidation this was considered to constitute an 'economic holding'. Under the land consolidation scheme, all landless, and those holding less than four acres were required to live in the new villages.6 The number of

6. 'Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, the Native Land Tenure Rules', 1956.
village plots in relation to adult male population therefore gives another measure of poverty among the population. Perhaps more significant is the amount of land occupied by villages: this proportion is higher in the South. There is a definite correlation between average farm size and per cent of total land held in village plots (Fig. 4), so that in the South, where farm size is small and the availability of land for subsistence severely restricted, a higher proportion of this land is taken up by villages than in the North.

The whole picture, then, is of southern areas being very limited in their ability to support their present population if this had to be done
according to old subsistence practices. The figures 2-4 have all demonstrated the more severe pressures on land to be found in the south of the District. Whilst it has been suggested that the history of settlement has had much to do with the development of differences between North and South which have been outlined, it may be that the distinction has become more acute as a result of varying rates of natural increase of population in the two parts of the District. From the 1948 and 1962 censi of population it is not possible to deduce rates of increase over small areas. However, there was a census of adult males in the District during land consolidation, and a comparison of the 1956 adult males with total population in 1962 may be significant in indicating yet another contrast between North and South. Not only may family size be greater in the South, but also the natural rate of increase of population may be higher (see Table). If so—and it is doubted that migration alone could account for these figures—this would be another factor contributing to the higher densities of population in the South and would accord with the generally accepted correlation of high rates of natural increase with regions of poverty. The discrepancy in traditional levels of wealth between North and South may well be increasing.

**Ratio of 1962 Population to 1956 Males***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northern Locations</th>
<th>Southern Locations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chania</td>
<td>Kabete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiganjo</td>
<td>Dagoretti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatamayu</td>
<td>Kiambaa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Komothai</td>
<td>Limuru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndaragu</td>
<td>Muguga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatundu</td>
<td>Lari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Githunguri</td>
<td>Ndumberi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


There is little to be gained in speculation as to what might have happened had the European settler not intruded. Reactions to might-have-been situations cannot be assessed. He did come and he did contribute to the development of the situation. At the same time, he introduced a new culture and technology which has at least to some extent enabled the South to overcome certain of its difficulties. By embracing the new technology, the South has reversed its relatively poor economic status, and in terms of the new economy, it is the South which should now be considered the richer area, though no doubt the conservative will question this.
The Southern Revolution

Whilst southern Kiambu has been more exposed to the disadvantages associated with land alienation, it has at the same time reaped more fully of the benefits. Much of this results directly from the greater exposure to modern technology facilitated by proximity. Land alienation produced a labour demand which was met from contiguous areas and this provided the first point of contact with the new technology. It also was the first point of contact with the cash economy, which, replacing (or supplementing) subsistence concepts, has become the foundation of modern concepts of wealth. These were the things that mattered, rather than the fact of work itself—for the same land would have employed many more people under Kikuyu systems than were employed by the European settlers. Neither is it to be suggested that this form of work or the cash economy was welcomed as a panacea for problems which were already recognised. Rather, one suspects, it was through the existing social and economic system, or in response to population pressure, that the more straightened members of society drifted into the European areas. The development of the ‘squatter system’, of labouring in return for cultivation rights, seems evidence of mutual adjustments between European needs and Kikuyu values.

On the southern flanks of Kiambu the City of Nairobi has developed. As it has grown in size and complexity, so its labour demands have risen, providing an outlet for some of the southern landless. The landowner has also profited from the developing City market. As administrative centre and focus of European economic and social activity, Nairobi became the hub of the communications network, and Kikuyu areas of Kiambu lying between the developing City and the European enclave were early exposed to the resultant economic forces and ultimately able to profit from them. It has been important for the South that most of its roads were built to serve primarily economic functions; those of the North were built for administrative purposes. Furthermore, since roads were built along lines of easiest construction, they follow ridgetop routes. These ridges run east-south-east and since Nairobi lies to the south of Kiambu District, northern roads emerge from the highlands well to the north of the City. Southern ridges tend to terminate at Nairobi, providing relatively direct links between urban and southern rural areas. Thus the South has a great communications advantage over the North, enhanced by the greater extent of tarmac. Again, the demands of the City were for long such that they could be met by the South alone. The North hardly participated in the Nairobi market. Its routes terminated at the high forest margin and there was no through traffic from which it might benefit or by which it might be stimulated. Relatively, the North was isolated, introspective, conservative. Gatundu is the only exception, being a marginal area close to work opportunity and market.
In response to these stimuli, southern agriculture has lately developed more rapidly than that of the North. Lack of adequate censal data prohibits quantitative assessment, but one or two contrasts from personal fieldwork can be presented in support of this. The South, in response to its marketing advantages, has adopted a greater variety of crops and a keener awareness of the advantages of specialisation. This shows particularly in the developing market-gardening industry. Often, considerable proportions of individual farms are given over to this activity, whilst the area devoted to traditional subsistence crops is declining. A related phenomenon is the gradual disappearance of the old systems of multiple cropping in favour of a more intense cultivation of one main crop, usually maize. The South is also distinguished by its intensity of land use, though this is little more than a reflection of its higher population densities. The gentler slopes of the South are more easily cultivated than those of the North, and there is more land suited to mechanisation though this is as yet uncommon. In the South, one also senses a greater capital investment in the land—better fences, better houses, more vehicles.

By contrast, the North seems more firmly in the grip of tradition. Agricultural crops and practices still follow old patterns and seem geared more to the subsistence economy of twenty years ago. The main effort at modernisation is put into the three crops coffee, tea and pyrethrum, which are grown in the appropriate ecological zones throughout the District. The larger farm size and lower pressure on land are reflected in the greater extent of woodland in the North, though as this is cleared to make charcoal, it does not now seem to be being replanted. This is not to imply that there are no good farmers in the North, or that they are unaware of developments elsewhere. Rather, the North had a later start, and in the absence of unlimited markets, it is at a disadvantage (in terms of the new economy—and regardless of the northerner's values) when in competition with the more favourably located South.

Indices of Southern Progress

It has been suggested that the South has a more highly developed economy and is more progressive than the North, and that there are good reasons for this. Data was available to demonstrate the earlier southern disadvantages. It is not so easy to demonstrate its recovery from this position of relative inferiority. With the thought that economic status is often reflected in patterns of spending, an index was sought by which some substantiation of the hypothesis of economic status inversion might be found. A number of such indices come to mind; dress, mode of travel, household services are some. But perhaps the most conspicuous is the house-type—and it presents the advantage of easy enumeration. Moreover it is a relatively stable element over the short run and this is an advantage when it is impossible to sample all areas at the same time.
Good quality housing certainly costs money, yet at the same time it may express psychological attitudes—a low quality house-type might be preferred by the conservative, so that whilst it may not necessarily indicate poverty, it may well suggest conservative attitudes. Since this paper has placed some emphasis on both poverty and conservatism, it seems fitting to select an indicator which represents both. Moreover, it was considered that in Kiambu sufficient variation in house-types had developed for significant results to be obtained.

It is not the present purpose to consider in detail the results of this house-type survey, but something should be said of the technique employed. First, a very simple classification was used, based on plan and construction materials:

- **Plan**: rectangular; circular/octagonal;
- **Wall**: stone; corrugated iron; wood; wattle and daub;
- **Roof**: tile; corrugated iron; other metal; thatch.

The rectangular plan is considered progressive, circular conservative. The octagonal plan is peculiar and for our purpose is here grouped with the circular which it replaces in some localities. The types of wall and roof are arranged in descending order of quality, with the wattle and daub wall and the thatched roof also being considered conservative. Second, a house-count was carried out by driving along ridgetop routes from lower to upper margins of the District, houses being counted and classified on the left hand side of the road unless topography necessitated counting on the right. The classes of house were then grouped for 3-mile stretches from the lower margin of the District to draw isoline maps (Fig. 5). Since land consolidation resulted in the redistribution of settlement along the roads,8 the use of this technique should not miss any significant element of Kikuyu house-types. But these maps have certain limitations. Because formerly alienated farmlands interposed between parts of north and south Kiambu (Fig. 1), it was possible to get only one good transect in the South. As this transect follows a major trunk road and passes through alternating areas of old Kikuyu settlement and more recent settlement schemes where Kikuyu have been settled on former European farms, it presents special problems of interpretation. For these reasons, isolines have not been connected between North and South.

Figure 5 shows the results for the three critical poverty/conservatism elements. It is unfortunate that we have to rely so heavily on results for northern areas, but in all maps the trend is the same. The occurrence of elements considered to represent poverty and/or conservatism increases to the north and west—away from the zones of culture contact, away from the major routeways, and away from Nairobi. The values obtained from the survey are affected by the occurrence of nucleated settlements

Fig. 5. — Distribution of traditional elements in Kiambu house structures, 1966.
along the traverses and this accounts for the irregularity of some isolines. The nucleated settlement resulting from land consolidation predisposes to poor housing types (as previously mentioned, these settlements are populated by the poor and landless) and an example may be seen in the maps in the high proportion of round wattle and daub houses with thatched roofs in the areas round Kiairie. Conversely, the older and more stable administrative and service centre predisposes to better housing and this is seen in the low proportion of poor elements in the neighbourhood of Githunguri. This is perhaps a further pointer to the association of wealth and progress with proximity to foci of the new culture. Similar factors influence even more the occurrence of house-types along the southern traverse, but there is nevertheless a tendency for house quality to decline away from Nairobi.

This evidence, despite its tenuous nature, does support the general hypothesis that the North, formerly rich, became under the modern economic system, an area of relative depression. Re-working of the house survey in 1971 showed clearly that under the government’s policies of agricultural development, the North is making up some lost ground. The patterns revealed in 1966 remain, but the gap in housing quality between North and South has been significantly reduced. This must be attributed in no small part to the development of tea and pyrethrum in the higher areas, where most change has taken place.

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It can clearly be shown that in terms of traditional economy and society, northern Kiambu was the favoured part of the District. This was largely due to the history of migration into Kiambu and was closely associated with the impact of European settlers upon southern areas. It is also clear that the new culture which brought such a threat to southern aspirations, has, by adoption, presented a means of escape and has enabled a reversal in economic fortune at least for those southerners who have accepted it. It is this adoption of a new system which has reversed the relative status of North and South. It is only by its receptivity that the South has been able to profit from its locational advantages, which relate only to the modern rural economy. In subsistence economies, location is significant only in the geographical sense of physical conditions of climate, soil and so on. There is not the sense of economic location which is so typical of trading economies.

Yet the North retains its latent advantages associated with its relatively more manageable population densities. If market conditions permit, it may recover some of its lost standing. It can never hope to do so, however, unless it wholly abandons the subsistence orientation in its agricultural economy. This must await the development of suitable market conditions in which the North is not competing with the South for the Nairobi market. It is not conceivable that the Nairobi demand
for horticultural produce will in the foreseeable future expand sufficiently to encourage the development of horticulture in the North. Neither is it conceivable that there will be any similar market, for instance at Thika. It is likely, then, that the South will turn increasingly to the production of horticultural produce with the North specialising more in cereals, ‘plantation’ crops, and perhaps dairy produce. Conditions of land tenure and location would seem to encourage such a course. We may expect that North-South differences will in future be manifested in differing patterns of land use as the rural population adapts more perfectly to modern economic realities.

The transition will not be easy and, though it is well on its way, it will be some time before it is complete. Economic revolution cannot be achieved without a complementary revolution in the whole social fabric. It is this adaptation which takes so much time and which is often so painful as to retard the very economic progress which is so much desired. In Kiambu, the whole social and economic structure has been disturbed, largely as a result of the varying rates of adoption of the new system. Its reorganisation is by no means complete and it would be a brave man who ventured to forecast what the ultimate outcome may be. One thing is certain; had it not been for the establishment of Nairobi in its present location, the economic history of Kiambu would have been very different.