Land Use Patterns in Pre-Colonial Kwale County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

While previous studies have captured the issues of decline in agricultural production and land degradation in the Kenya coastal region as described by Gichobi and Kungu (2020) and Omondi (2010) little attention has been paid to understanding the direct and long-term effects of the precolonial state's land policies on coastal Kenya. The objective of this study was to land use patterns in pre-colonial Kwale County, Kenya. The aim was to reconstruct pre-colonial land use trajectories in Kwale County. The methodology used was the historical qualitative approach, it employed the Elite Theory (Vilfredo Pareto) and Articulation of the Modes of Production Theory (based on Marxist framework by Jean Copans), providing a framework to analysis the impact of structure-power relations on access to land. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The archives contained the precolonial government administrative reports, government reports, land records and legal texts, whereas forty oral interviews were conducted. They were sampled using the purposive sampling and snow-ball sampling methods. For secondary sources research includes monographs, journal articles and dissertations dealing with land governance and food security systems. The findings have also revealed that Mijikenda community of pre-colonial Kwale County was organized in common ownership of land, co-operative efforts and firm cultural values which influenced their farming, pastoral and forestry practices. These methods were sustainable, spiritual, fostered social unity and protected the natural resource and maintained food security with a larger picture of very strong social and political organization. The pre-colonial land management practices of the Mijikenda people in Kwale County represented a paradigm of ingrained community system linking livelihoods, governance, spirituality and land care in maintaining agricultural production, community solidarity, and traditions. The study will therefore be beneficial to local administrators, government, development organizations in their pursuit for sustainable land governance in Kwale County, an issue closely related to endemic food insecurity and injustices in the region. The study adds region based analysis in the already available literature on the subject thus boosting land-rights campaigns and offering research material for studies on the nexus of land tenure, development and food security.

Keywords: Land Use Patterns, Food Security, Mijikenda Community, Land Policies, Kwale County

INTRODUCTION

For many societies in history, land has been the single most important resource, helping to establish the nature of society, culture and governance (Hedi, 2002). Land is not only an economic resource, but provides identity, security, and sustenance. Land policy reforms are often a significant determining factor for food security and livelihood strategies in many parts of the world. It is, for example clear that access to land alone is not a substitute for appropriate systems in the case of Mexico's Ejido system which introduced a degree of land redistribution to peasants following the revolution in 1917, but failed to eradicate the inequalities of the post-revolutionary period, with continued insecurity of land tenure, access to credit, and inadequate farm size (Jones and Ward, 1998). Likewise in India, post-colonial reforms such as the Zamindari Abolition and Land Ceiling Acts redistributed lands away from large landlords and reduced feudal disparities, but the problems of informal tenancy and fragmented plots remained, resulting in continuing low productivity (Singh, 2009). Similar issues have been observed in other countries of the South including Brazil, Peru, South Africa and Zimbabwe where access to

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land needed to be complemented by technical assistance, credit availability, and sustainable land management practices in order to boost agricultural productivity and food security (Greenberg, 2004).

In Africa, land has been seen not only as an economic resource, but also as intrinsically linked with social structure, and has been managed communally based upon the traditional belief that access to land should also foster a sense of social responsibility and adherence to societal norms (Moyo, 2004). In pre-colonial Kwale county, land tenure was managed communally based upon elders and clan heads who allocated portions of land to various uses like farming, grazing and settlement, creating an equitable access to land while fostering ecological conservation (John, 2015). Members of the community cultivated subsistence crops such as maize, cassava, beans etc. Together with commercial crops such as coconuts, cashews and mangoes; they maintained sacred communal spaces and the entire village settlement layout was related to fertility and access to water resources, while ecological balance and societal organization were strengthened by practices such as crop diversification and rotation, including the participation of women and the youth (John, 2015).

This traditional system, however, was significantly disrupted in pre-colonial Kenya under colonial rule. Land tenure policy like the 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance, and 1915 Land Ordinance declared all unregistered land to be Crown land, forcibly displacing local communities and encouraging settlers of European descent (Boone, 2012). Later reforms such as the Swynnerton plan initiated in 1954 tended to benefit elites rather than small farmers, creating fragmentation of common property resources and hindering the process of communal ownership and control while reducing agricultural output (Boone et al., 2016). After the attainment of independence, the country tried to redress imbalances through schemes like the Million Acre Settlement scheme and land Adjudication Act but this did not address some of the core issues such as corruption, poor implementation of the policy and increased land fragmentation (Musyoki, 2016). The 2010 Constitution acknowledged the need for equitable land distribution, as well as for community participation and management of land resources but it still failed to operationalize certain fundamental aspects of the pre-colonial communal property system such as its environmental stewardship and social equity aspects (David, 2013).

Today, Kwale County stands between the need to reform the systems inherited from colonial traditions and pressures on its resources. Kwale County has long been a center for subsistent agriculture, coastal trade and the management of ecological resources. Yet today there are absentee land ownership, poor formal tenure system of land (only 22.5% of land has titles), urbanization, and speculative acquisition and investment in land, reducing land productivity and jeopardizing food security (Boone, 2012; Thomson, 2011). Adopting some aspects of the pre-colonial traditional land system that supported an equitable and ecocentric approach to land management could assist in the development of successful land policy interventions today, learning from the lessons from Africa and other countries that successful land policy reforms necessitate effective institutions, access to credit and other services (Singh, 2009).

In conclusion, land has been central to livelihood, cultural identity and the conservation of natural resources in Kwale County for a long period in history. Pre-colonial interventions, however, led to the breakdown of traditional land management systems in favor of policies that resulted in inequalities and further fragmentation and insecurity of tenure and this has had significant implications for food security. The reintegration of some of the effective elements of traditional communal land systems and its linkage with modern technical and economic support mechanisms would form a good foundation upon which to design effective future land policy interventions in the country.

Statement of the Problem

Before the colonial era, land tenure systems were organized around kinship ties within an organized community in Kwale County. The communal tenure of land was therefore used collectively according to kin groups and clan affiliation and was the bedrock of an integrated agriculture, pastoral, fishery and hunting subsistence economy that allows diversified source of livelihood in different seasons. Its usage was also elastic and managed by socio-institution that regulated entry, settle conflicts and ensure ecological integrity of resource. This way, sustainable security of food resources were maintained through cooperation and exchange, among people and between man and nature.The problem therefore arises due to the lack of sufficient attention given to the indigenous land tenure systems in past and present research studies and policy formulation on food insecurity and the utilization of other

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resources in Kwale County. Many available works have not considered how these traditional land tenure system aided in achieving food security and sustainable utilization of land and water resources. With this lacuna in knowledge, the solutions to food insecurity in the present-day are often irrelevant and that present land tenure policy tends not to build on practices of collective and equable sharing of resource that have worked in the past.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore the land use patterns in pre-colonial Kwale County, Kenya

LITERATURE REVIEW

The pre-colonial land-use systems throughout the world were based on community rules, ecological principles, and spiritual ontologies and therefore supported environmentally sustainable practices, while strengthening both social cohesion and food security. These systems consisted of people, either as cultivators, pastoralists, hunter-gatherers or as any of the latter. Land-use systems were determined and customized according to the geographical, ecological and social context (Gishobi & Grant, 2019). These systems of management were enabled by communal tenure systems, rotation farming practices and flexible settlements. Through these strategies people were able to cope with natural changes and problems like seasons, soil erosion and droughts. In addition, the social structure based on community ties to land enabled the people to be in constant balance with nature. The attachment to land also had cultural and spiritual dimensions, viewing it as a source of individual identity, as well as being a communal property and source of life for present and future generations and not a mere resource to be exploited.

However, although the pre-colonial land use systems were beneficial, there were also conflicts, such as conflicts between herders and farmers. Pastoralists in Horn of Africa and Sudan for example had their activities encroached upon by modern farming practices, coupled with the poor land tenure systems that promoted conflicts between herders due to unclear territorial rights of grazing. This conflict between herders and farmers is still relevant today. Similar land reforms that aimed at addressing historical injustices has been undermined in sub-Saharan Africa by growing populations, social and structural inequalities leading to continuous challenges that hinder women from securing their land rights and thus influencing agricultural output and food security in nations such as Zimbabwe and Cameroon (Kalabamu, 2019). Poverty across the world will continue to make secured land tenure a vital aspect that ensures eradication of poverty, equity in access of available resources and also as a basis for sustainable development (Kerr, 2005).

The pre-colonial regimes had the following shared characteristics across the continent of Africa; social property, spiritual and cultural value placed on land, an in-depth knowledge of the local environment, and the community's adaptive practices. West Africa in countries such as Ghana and Nigeria are clear examples of such systems in place. In Ghana, customary practices of communal land management governed by traditional leaders ensures subsistence farming, ceremonies and upkeep of religious shrines. This communal practice was supplemented by traditional land management techniques such as rotation and inter-culture practices to promote ecological well-being and community bonds; although these traditional systems are facing serious disruption in the face of modern interventions, namely individual land tenure and commodification (Ameyaw et al., 2021). Nigeria had regional diversity in land use and ownership in traditional Africa. In the North, pastoral farming prevailed over a range of activities which dominated in the centre and south, where communities focused on farming and forests. These systems integrated the socio-cultural and environmental needs and they are considered threatened by modern legislation like the Land Use Act of 1978 (Ugonabo et al., 2023).

Botswana, in southern Africa, traditional leaders and seniors owned land and were the ones who distributed it amongst the community for use of cultivation and for pastoral activities. The economy and socio-cultural values revolved around pastoralism, while community and spiritual issues dictated and influenced the allocation and management of land resources. Small-grains farming, mixed cultivation, deforestation, hunting, foraging, animal breeding and use of irrigation techniques are land management techniques used in indigenous knowledge that ensure food security and ecological stability (Kauma, 2021). Colonial policies have led to individual land tenure, formal adjudication and introduction of cash cropping at the expense of the traditional practices and land tenure. This practice has undermined the traditional communal systems, resulting in reduced land availability, and

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increased problems with ecological management and hence food insecurity (Omondi, 2020). Nevertheless most traditional land use practices have been maintained to date, and communities have the ability to continue integrating traditional ecological knowledge with new economic realities.

Land use systems in Kenya have shown similar dynamism and resilience since time immemorial. Small-scale farming, pastoralism and hunting-gathering alongside specific settlement areas around floodplains, water sources and pastures assured sustenance. Lack of land competition and people's mobility further enhanced and complemented traditional ecological knowledge used in land use management (Gishobi Jr & Grant Jr, 2019). Policies enacted from 1895 to 2010, however transformed Kenyan land tenure systems: legislation, cash crops, formal adjudication resulted in loss of communal control over land, thus influencing agricultural yields and livelihoods (Hannaford, 2023). Subsistence farming and ecological principles remained prevalent in Embu (Karigi, 2008), while dynamic systems of farming and ecological management were adopted in the coastal region such as Kwale County. Shifting farming, communally owned land and sacred forest protection maintained the ecological health and food security in Kwale County (Ngala, 2020).

In conclusion, the indigenization of knowledge, gender sensitive and locally adapted land reform is crucial to sustainable land management, maintenance of the ecosystems and equal access to food resources. The understanding of social, ecological and statutory aspects of land use enhances the ability to resist challenges, conserve resources and achieve food security on the long-term (Kerr, 2005).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories closely linked together; The Articulation of Modes of Production Theory and Elite Theory have been used in the study to determine the extent to which land policies affected food security in Kwale County. The Articulation of Modes of Production theory indicates that instead of the pre-capitalist and capitalist system relationship forms were not terminated but transformed during the colonial period, the colonial state restructured the communal land tenure systems to facilitate the production of cash crops and extraction of labor (Wolpe, 1972; Garo, 2010; Guenther, 1980). Control of land by the colonizers led to transformation of the land use systems in Kenya by seizure of productive agricultural land for the settlers and preservation of some characteristics of the communal tenure so that they may be able to maintain control of labor and limit productivity (Mulae, 2016). Elite Theory suggests the manipulation of land ownership for the sake of vested elite interests and the continued existing inequalities under the colonial and post-colonial governments (Dahl, 2005). Food security issues were enhanced in Kwale County because of access of land by the elite to productive areas.

Research Methodology

A historical research design was employed to investigate the impact of land policies on food security in Kwale County during the pre-colonial era (Kapur, 2018). Kwale County was selected because it has arable land and a diverse range of peoples, from the Digo and Duruma to the Kamba and minority Arab groups (Alden Wily, 2018). Archive data were drawn from Kenya National Archives, the Kwale County land registry, and the colonial administration records; covering the period from the late 19th century up to the early 21st century and includes ordinances relating to land tenure and policy documents, as well as maps depicting land tenure systems. Forty purposively selected respondents: land officials, community elders and administrators participated in the study and was in semi-structured interviews form (Mwangi & Kariuki, 2022). Interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated when necessary and the appropriate ethical protocol including consent and confidentiality were followed. Data were thematically analyzed inductively and deductively using coding techniques (Karanja & Wambua, 2023). A coded book was used in this research process and to add to its validity triangulation technique was also employed and conflicts were resolved through evidence taken from contemporaries' records.

FINDINGS

The Origin, Migration and Settlement of the Mijikenda Community

In Kwale County, there is a local group of the Mijikenda that co-exists with Kamba and Luo, with the greater population being the Mijikenda (Kitula et al. 2006). The Mijikenda are a Bantu-speaking group of nine sub-

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tribes. The nine sub-tribes that make up the Mijikenda are the Chonyi, Duruma, Digo, Giriuma, Jibana, Kambe, Kauma, Rabai and Ribe. Together, these nine tribes are known as the nine kayas, where a kaya was a heavily fortified place which was a centre of their cultural, political and religious lives (Kitula et al. 2006). Among the nine kayas, Digo and Duruma sub-tribes dominate the population in Kwale County.

Their origins lie in Shungwaya north of the Tana River, in the current Southern Somalia (Mhango 2008). Shungwaya is considered their ancestral land. The Mijikenda migrated southward over several centuries. The migration was driven by factors that included resource stress, overpopulation, environmental constraints and threats by Cushitic pastoralists such as the Galla (also known as the Oromo) (Julius 2020).As one oral informant noted, "*Galla people were very harsh on them, they wanted to take their land so that they can graze and do some cultivation but they tried to resist this move."*

Theories of migration can explain the movements. The chain migration theory explains that original migrants could provide assistance with migration of relatives, where the social ties were kept between the generations (Julius, 2020). The segmented migration theory further explains why they moved as clans and not as a single group, which has resulted in fragmented settlement pattern along the coast (Julius, 2020), as is evidenced by, for example, the settlement of the Digo in lowland areas, that is suitable for agriculture and trade and Duruma settlement on the defensible high altitudes like Kinongo in Kwale County.

These migrations were spurred on by environmental factors such as drought and erosion (Mhango, 2008). The Mijikenda made defensive fortified settlements called the kayas inland (Lwanga, 2014) along the coast in Kilifi, Kwale and Mombasa, they are built on the forested ridges within and around water sources and they are incorporated within the wider system of their socio-cultural patterns which include defense, farming, rule and spiritual beliefs and resource management (Spear, 1978; Willis).

The ritual life and management of their environment was built around these sacred groves around the kayas. UNESCO (2018) points out that the traditions and practices connected to the kayas strongly affirm the spiritual values are linked to the conservation of biological diversity, and ritual life of initiation, settling disputes and ceremonies during the year were held within these sacred groves and also served to enhance the power of the council of elders called the kambi (Harrison, 2010). As one of the informants noted, *"After their migration, they saw a good and fertile land to do their economic activities and that's why they settled in Kwale."*

The Mijikenda villages were a compromise between security, sustenance and religiosity. They farmed maize, millet, cassava, yams and vegetables while raising livestock (Spear, 1978). The Digo optimized the use of the good lowlands, and the Duruma utilized the protection offered by the highlands (Mhando, 2022). The Swahili developed resistance through trading with other peoples (Willis), and practiced the kaya system which is a flexible mix of ecology, polity, and culture (Kitula et al., 2006).

The Place of Land in the Social, Political and Economic Organization of the Mijikenda Community;

To the Mijikenda people on Kenya's coast, land is more than a commodity; it is ancestors, identity, and the link between generations and leadership. This collective inheritance structures kin, authority, and subsistence, anchored by the kaya – sacred forest villages of communication with ancestors and the spirit realm.

Land and Social Organization

The social, spiritual and cultural life in Mijikenda, Digo and Duruma were based on territory which comprised homesteads (*mbari*), which governed and administered spiritual affairs (Thomas, 1978). The land was a component of the homestead chiefs and was governed by the patrilineal clans (mbari) (Mutoro, 1985). The mechanism of control was by the age sets *(rika)* and was intrinsically tied with initiation, control by elders (*wakulu wa ng'anda*), kinship and land management. The land was held in common by the male line. Brantley claims that Mijikenda identity was forged through territorialisation of the land and kinship, and that therefore identity was synonymous with ownership of the land of ancestors (Brantley, 1981).Such a connection is recounted in word of mouth: *"After circumcision, sons were ready to marry and own a family and therefore they were allocated some parcels of land to start their marriage life''* (Julius Ngala, OI, 2/6/2025) and "*A suitor without ancestral land was considered less desirable, as land ownership was tied to a man's ability to provide*

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for a family and secure ancestral blessing for offspring" (Andrew Chivatsi, OI, 15/6/2025). Place-based narratives reinforced lineage and memory: "*This hill belonged to the Wamzale, that sacred tree was planted by the first ancestors, this river marked the boundary after the Duruma crossed from Taita"* (Amina Said, OI, 14/6/25). Land also guided birth rites (Mwana Asha Juma, OI, 12/6/2025), initiation ceremonies, and burials (Mwasaru Mwawasi, OI, 16/6/2025), Therefore the land functioned as a divine covenant that tethered human life to the past as it gave meaning, history, and authority to life while directing people towards respectful living and ecological responsibility, the essence of Mijikenda existence.

Land and Political Organization

Political power for the Mijikenda in the pre-colonial era was directly tied to land ownership. A council of elders called *kambi* was the source of political power, legitimized by their control over communal lands and tribal traditions (David, 1991). Elders supervised and controlled land use, managed property disputes, inherited land rights, and performed rituals for the consent of the ancestors before undertaking a crucial land decision, such as opening a new field (*kukata chiranze). "exercised power not through coercion but through the moral authority of being guardians of land and custom*."

Kaya forests served as important political centers where the council of elders (*kambi ya kaya)* was responsible for enforcing the law, conducting rites and ceremonies, and maintaining the society's culture and tradition (Spear, 1978). Age-sets *(rika)* governed the warriors, as well as the upcoming leaders of the society; where young boys were responsible for the protection of the people and the older for maintaining the rules (Brantley, 1981). Clans *(mbari)* would convene and meet together for assemblies ensuring a distribution of power; so that a centralized authority could be kept in check. The economy was also rooted to the land in a system of rotational cultivation for grains such as millet, maize, cassava, sorghum, yams, bananas and beans. Brantley points out that 'Mijikenda economy followed the agricultural rhythm; the more land that was owned the more wealth, labor, and time that was at ones disposal'. Women provided food for all: *"Without women's storage and planning, the whole community would have starved during drought"* (Mwasaru Mwawasi, OI, 16/6/2025). Surplus produce facilitated trade with coastal towns like Shimoni, Vanga, Gazi, and Msambweni (Grace, 2025). Overall, land shaped Mijikenda political, spiritual, and economic life, linking authority, ritual, leadership, and sustainable agriculture (Augie, 2022).

Land and Economic Organization

In pre-colonial Kwale, the Mijikenda economy was agrarian, with land central to livelihood, culture, and Spiritual traditions. They employed slash and burn cultivation for the following crops; millet, maize, cassava, yams, bananas, cowpeas and pigeon peas (Brantley, 1981). Fertility was an important influence on settlement; Duruma practiced mixed farming and animal husbandry, while Digo cultivation was based on coconuts and cashews. The cultivation was community-driven and based on ancestral wisdom and environmental consciousness. Sorghum and millet were important, almost sacred, cereal crops and were used in various ritual activities.

Planting of legumes together with other crops naturally restored the fertility of the soil. Fallows are crucial in restoring soil chemistry and the ecosystems of the area. Natural events, such as lunar cycles determined where, when, and how crops were planted, weeding occurred, or harvest times were met. Elders managed and organized community work and knowledge transfer. Women are essential in crop production. *"Without women's storage and planning, the whole community would have starved during drought"* (Mwasaru Mwawasi, OI, 16/6/2025). They ensured biodiversity, food security, and social stability, reflected in the saying, '*A woman is the food treasure of the community.'*

In addition to agriculture, Mijikenda engaged in trade. Mijikenda surpluses could be traded in the coastal villages of Shimoni, Vanga, Gazi and Msambweni for salt, cloth, and metal tools through Digo intermediaries (Spear, 1978; Grace, 2025). This specialization of resources among coastal, mid-altitude and inland semi-arid regions resulted in sustainable resource management and the development of an interdependent society. Migration, including seasonal transhumance, allowed for the exchange of information and cultural experiences. The trade routes had religious connotations where offerings and prayers (libation) were said at *muzuka* or holy sites.

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In conclusion, the Mijikenda economy was a composite of sustainable agriculture, consciousness of the environment, communal labor and spirituality. Subgroups, such as the Duruma and Digo, relied on the combined production of crops and livestock while also sustaining soil fertility by allowing their fields to fallow after each planting and intercropping different crops. Women were also able to secure food, maintain the ecological environment and uphold their tradition due to labor, ritual and trade practices; thus the Mijikenda enjoyed a resilient, self-sufficient society where their livelihood, community and spirituality were closely tied to the land (Augie, 2022).

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Pre-colonial land use among Mijikenda people in Kwale County has been governed by social, economic and political organization founded on communal aspects. Mijikenda community migrating from Central Highlands to Coastal area in the 16 th century settled and formed several sub-groups such as Giriama, Digo and Duruma each controlling its land but coordinating activities and resource use for common welfare. Each sub-group was responsible for their own land but had common agreement to practice land use in common manner, share resource, cultivate in rotation manner, protected each other's right to land use and no one was allowed to exploit to deplete natural resources. Their agricultural systems (shifting cultivation, forest management), was in line with environmental protection where they allowed to maintain soil fertility, food security and biodiversity, besides cultivation other land activities include grazing, hunting, gathering that ensured survival and social life, since each family shared livestock and resources through common management of such activities. In addition they had spiritual and cultural attachment with their land that made them consider land as divine; their ancestors guided both natural and human life. The Mijikenda people's land use system in pre-colonial period represented combination of conservation of the environment, social harmony and cultural identity. Analyzing their pre-colonial land use patterns helps in gaining knowledge about their political organization and management of resources and the worldview of the community with emphasis on the role of communal land use system in maintaining societal well-being and continuity of their culture.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that pre-colonial Mijikenda land use patterns in Kwale County went beyond basic survival and involved the combination of a social, economic, and spiritual system. Land was jointly owned, its management governed by communal decisions and a system that integrated both individual autonomy and collective welfare. Land use patterns of shifting cultivation, forestry, animal grazing, hunting and collection served to promote soil fertility and species diversity as well as enhance both family and community relations. Land also possessed spiritual and religious values, connecting the people to both ancestral past and social identity. All together the Mijikenda combined effective agriculture, sustainable natural resource use and values to create a unique society with social cohesion that could be learnt from in terms of land management and community life in contemporary times.

Recommendations for Practice

The study recommends embracing the traditional communal land tenure systems of the Mijikenda for Kwale County as a way of fostering sustainable agriculture, environmental care and co-operation among communities while maintaining cultural heritage.

Recommendation for Further Research

Further research could further analyze pre-colonial land use in Kwale County through an analysis of how devolution impacts on local land administration, comparisons to other coastal counties and an analysis of the role and agency of women in pre-colonial land management and tenure.

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