

## **THE TOBACCO MONOPOLY IN SIRISIA: BUREAUCRATIC ENTERPRISE AND ECONOMIC CHANGE, 1975-2005**

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### **Abstract**

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*The study investigated the impact of tobacco on the economy and society in Sirisia, Bungoma County using the concepts of innovation, adaptation and commercialization. The study applied these concepts to explain how the tobacco scheme was built upon a repressive and sustained work regime among peasants at the expense of other agricultural pursuits. The paper holds that although peasant economy in Sirisia was self-sustaining, the introduction of commercial tobacco cultivation from 1975 completely altered this set-up. The study was based on archival research, oral interviews as well as analysing literature on tobacco plant and its history.*

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**Key Words:** Sirisia, Tobacco, Monopoly, Bureaucratic Enterprise, Economic Change

### **Introduction**

The integration of the peasantry into the international capitalist system through commercialisation of agriculture such as tobacco production has occupied the interest of a number of scholars (Chilote, 1984, Boeke, 1961 and Boesen & Mohele, 1979). The works of Mynt (1965), Levin (1960), Forbes (1984), Mintz (1985), Bryson (1981), Babalola (1993), Muhereza (1995), Aliro (1993) and Otieno (1998), for example, represent attempts by social scientists to come to grips with the issue through an analysis of the impact of the tobacco production system on the peasantry. These scholars hold the view that, the impact of commercialization of tobacco on the indigenous economy was overly negative. Otieno and Aliro for instance, envisage that, apart from the shift to commercial tobacco production by the peasantry, tobacco production had a negative impact on both agriculture and environment. The views are shared by Stubbs (1985), Rubert (1997), Wilbert (1991), Goodman (1993), deJesus (1985), Goodspeed (1954), Murrow (1994) and Ndalilah (2015) who albeit in different environments also discussed issues relating to tobacco and its history. The main focus of these works has been its origin, spread and the political debates that the plant engendered while others have centred on its role in indigenous practices (Scott, 1982, Wilbert, 1987).

In spite of this literature on tobacco, scholars have not adequately explored the process by which tobacco not only became a commodity but also part of Kenyan history. These accounts describe tobacco not only as an impetus but a monopoly in peasant economies such as in Sirisia. The critical question is: how did this crop acquire modern negative peculiarities? While drawing on reported evidence from the history of the crop, Geist holds that the impact of tobacco is overly negative which he attributes to "Western style of agro-capitalism" (Lohnert & Geist, 1999). Proponents of the surplus approach and modernization theories stress the positive effects of tobacco production (Forbes, 1984, 3).

Underdevelopment theorists and some Marxist scholars have come to a radically different conclusion (Nabudere, 1979). They emphasize that tobacco was an uncertain and unremunerative crop with labour demand incompatible with the output (Ibid). This is in contrast to proponents of the tobacco industry who hold that tobacco boosts local economies; it alleviates the social and economic problems associated with surplus labour by providing employment to peasant growers (Mamdani, 1996, Daily Nation, January 13, 2006). It also complements food production contributing towards 'modernisation' of the rural areas (Muhereza, 1995., Aliro, 1993).

As to how tobacco reached Africa and Kenya in particular, there have been suggestions that it was due to Arab influence via long distance trade while other sources point to Portuguese presence on the Kenyan coast. This exotic tobacco venture was quite limited until when the British American Tobacco (BAT) Kenya Limited and the Kenya government embarked on making the country self-sufficient in tobacco production. Some sources hold that, tobacco was native to Sirisia and grew wild. Others suggest that it *originated from Nilotic communities and Bugishu*. Of importance is that indigenous tobacco was grown on small scale. The Babukusu in Sirisia, therefore, have had a long association with the crop.

Although commercial tobacco production in Kenya has been on for over a century, its use has been an issue of great controversy (Khaoya, 1992). Although tobacco production creates employment and generates foreign exchange, these benefits seem outweighed by the negative effects it has on the economy of peasant households (Ibid). In Sirisia, it destroyed the indigenous economy by siphoning off the labour, land and time meant for the growth of alternative crops and pasture. The study focuses on the history of men and women previously predominantly mixed farmers to whom tobacco became important for their existence as small-scale contract producers for tobacco companies (Otele, 2010, Daily Nation, May 7, 2002). Thus, the history of tobacco farming in Sirisia reflects the forces that have shaped capitalism in the 20th Century (Burbach & Flynn, 1980, Dos Santos, 1970). Therefore, the paper analysed tobacco monopoly in Sirisia, Bungoma County, following efforts by the BAT to commercialise its production through contract farming.

### **Need to Understand the Impact of Cash Crops on Economy and Society**

A study on the impact of cash crops on peasant sector is presently a central theme in Kenyan history. However, the impact of tobacco on society and economy in Sirisia has not been adequately studied. Earlier works dealt with food insecurity and the general impact of tobacco farming in rural areas such as Sirisia. Hence scholars need to study and document the effects of tobacco and its monopoly at micro level and present a systematic analysis as pertains to Sirisia. Not only is it important to focus attention on the bureaucracy and impact of Multinationals through tobacco cultivation but the period upon which the research centres represents an important epoch in Kenya's peasant Bukusu Society and economy.

This paper particularly notes that, commercial tobacco cultivation began in the colonial period as one of the pioneer cash crops. It analyses the role of commercial tobacco cultivation in Sirisia social relations and economy between 1975 and 2005. This paper, therefore, seeks to answer the following questions: How did tobacco agriculture insert itself in a region dominated by cultivation of crops like millet, sunflower, coffee, maize and/or even horticultural crops? What were its special characteristics? What did this mean to the economic and social position of the tobacco producers?

### **Materials and Methods**

Sirisia is part of the Bungoma-Busia tobacco growing region and is located between longitudes 34°E and 35°E and the latitudes 0° and 10°N (Republic of Kenya, 1999). Sirisia is located in Bungoma County, one of the administrative regions in Kenya. The area has a high population. This is attributed to conventionally rain fed agriculture practiced in this region. The soils are rich and suitable for mixed farming except in some parts like Chebukutumi, Bisunu, Butonge, Namutokholo, Yabeko, Kabuchai and Chongoi whose soils are underlain by hardpans (Ibid).

Primary sources were sought through oral interviews in form of field interviews and eye witness accounts. By use of question guidelines the informants were allowed to talk freely on the topic of study. Archival sources were then used to supplement oral interviews. More data was obtained from BAT annual Reports, Bungoma District Development Plans, Reports from the Ministry of agriculture, Ministry of Environment and Statistical abstracts. Other sources included books, Journals, Newspapers, Articles and Theses.

## Results and Discussion

The history of tobacco starts around eight thousand years ago, when two species of the plant *Nicotiana rustica* and *Nicotiana tabacum*, were dispersed from the Americas (Gately, 200,12-3). Modern commercial tobacco is descended directly from the latter species. But what is tobacco? The answer to this question requires an analysis of several key areas. Tobacco exists in four principal dimensions: botany, chemistry and pharmacology, economics-production and consumption and history. The last dimension is the main subject of this paper, particularly in reference to its commercialisation and subsequent monopoly of the economy in Sirisia in the period, 1975-2005.

The tobacco plant is one of the genus *Nicotiana*, one of the larger divisions of the family *solanaceae*, otherwise known as nightshades (Heiser, 1975). The nightshade family also includes among others the potatoe and pepper (Ibid). According to Goodspeed, the origin of tobacco was South America from where it was dispersed to other continents (Goodspeed, 1954, 8). Most authorities in the field are in agreement with Goodspeed, although some dispute his interpretation of the continental transfer (Scott, 82, Goodman, 1993, 30). But until the end of the fifteenth century, no one outside the American continents had knowledge of the cultivated varieties of this plant (Goodspeed, 1954, 8). Today, it is grown in over 120 countries and its products are universally known (Ibid, 32). There is further agreement that of all the species in existence, only two, *tabacum* and *rustica*, have been cultivated (Gately, 2001, 3, Wilbert, 18). By the time Europeans sighted the New World, *Nicotiana tabacum* was cultivated primarily in the tropical regions while *Nicotiana rustica* was cultivated widely (Goodspeed, 1954, 8). As to how tobacco reached Africa and Kenya in particular, there have been suggestions that, it was through Arab influence via long distance trade and Portuguese presence on the Kenyan coast. Other sources hold that, it was indigenous. Thus, there is need to trace indigenous tobacco cultivation to offer a background to the discussion.

### Indigenous Tobacco

Before commercialisation of tobacco in Sirisia from 1975, there existed an indigenous type of tobacco (*eraba*) that was grown and used in social ceremonies (OI, Solomon Khisa Wakoli, October 28, 2010). Tobacco was therefore, not a new item in Sirisia socio-economic life. It was, as such, an item of trade on early markets in which the Babukusu bartered for salt and iron implements (such as hoes, spears, knives and arrows) with the Samia and Iteso neighbours (Ndalilah, 2015).

The origin of indigenous tobacco is quite obscure, although a common explanation is that the crop was in use for long. The exact date and place of origin is therefore still contestable. Like the South Americans, the Babukusu used the crop for religious and medicinal purposes. In invoking oral history to ascertain the origin and presence of indigenous tobacco in pre-colonial Sirisia, the respondents, agreed that, there was an indigenous type of tobacco (*eraba*) before the exotic one by the BAT (OI, Andrea Ndalila, September 28, 2009). It had different names depending on the use (Ibid). For example, it was constantly referred to as *eraba*, *lulwika*, pipe, snuff and leaf tobacco respectively. They recalled that tobacco was native to Sirisia and grew wildly like *enyonyi*. One respondent had a different view of its origin. He notes that *tobacco came from Nilotic communities and from the Bugishu inveterate smokers* (OI, Andrea Ndalila, September 28, 2009).

Indigenous tobacco was grown in small *shambas* (*libumbi*) within the homesteads or in the vegetable gardens outside a senior woman's hut. One informant observed that, it did well when planted in places where chicken droppings or cow dung was disposed and was planted alongside vegetable (OI, Solomon Wanambuko, September 28, 2010). But all the informants agreed that it was planted within the backyard of the homestead. It was used for snuff, (*Khung'uila*) chewed, smoked (*sinaka*) or smoked in pipes (*sikhwabi*) suggesting origins from the *Kwavi Maasai* (Nilotic Speakers as the name suggests) and used for medicinal purposes for both human and livestock (OI, Daniel Matanda Wekesa, July 29, 2009). The respondents also agreed that, indigenous tobacco was processed into products with a wide range of uses. It was remembered that, it was ground into powder, mixed with water and users placed it in the mouth (Ibid).

Comparing it to the exotic one, the informants concurred that, unlike the exotic one, it was not labour intensive and harmful to man and the environment (OI, Phelisters Ndalila, July 28, 2010). It was never on large scale production or for commercial purposes. It was specifically for domestic use, only by old men and women while the exotic one, was used by all age groups (Ibid). Indigenous tobacco was sold while stacked in banana fibres and was highly valued (Ibid). At present, indigenous tobacco (*eraba*) is still sold in local markets in Sirisia (Ibid). But as indicated, its yields were too low. Commercial tobacco production in Sirisia began in 1975 when the BAT established a leaf processing plant at Malakisi and consolidated its interests (Maxon, 1992).

This study chronicles the history of BAT in Kenya and examines how tobacco cultivation monopolised the peasant economy in rural Sirisia in period 1975-2005. Like any other agribusiness, tobacco cultivation in Sirisia, exacerbated the social inequalities that aggravated the problem of hunger and dependency (Forbes, 1984, 71). Hence, an analysis of the tobacco monopoly in Sirisia, both historically and logically, proceeds against this background.

### **Exotic Tobacco in Sirisia**

For a proper analysis of exotic tobacco cultivation in Sirisia, an attempt is made to conceptualise the context of tobacco cultivation in Sirisia along three fronts namely; theoretical conception, a highlight on Sirisia economy prior to tobacco commercialisation and the entry of BAT. Before 1975 (Babukusu) peasants in Sirisia, Bungoma County, forged a robust agricultural system embedded on the social, cultural, economic as well as political fabrics that kept society together. They cultivated a number of crops such as cassava, sorghum and millet. This was in addition to the cultivation of cash crops including coffee, sunflower, cotton, onions and tomatoes. But with the dawn of commoditization, tobacco became a cultural touchstone of “pleasure and success”, a coveted commodity that monopolised the peasant economy and brought forth a new era in Sirisia history.

The Babukusu like other communities in Kenya resisted most government measures to engage in petty commodity production not because they were “late comers” in the modernization process or that, they were ‘litigious and backward’ but because as argued, they had alternative cash earning avenues in livestock sales and other economic pursuits. As Maxon observes in his book *Going Their Separate Ways*, the roots of resistance to tobacco by peasants could be argued under three premises: resistance of pre-capitalist elements in the rural areas to capitalist transformation that would promote rapid rural development, the constraints imposed by the international economy and international capital and the actions of the state (Maxon, 1992, 70). According to the first argument, peasant production possesses an internal logic which permits it to resist the pressures of capitalist production relations and thus reproduce itself indefinitely (Ellis, 1992, 51., Barker, 1989, 131-32). As far as Africa was concerned, Hyden is a consistent advocate of the fundamental significance of this obstacle (Hyden, 1983). He contends that, capitalism was not strong enough to transform “the peasant mode of production and the ensuing economy of affection”(Ibid). In this view, such an economy frustrated attempts to promote rural development. In reference to Kenya, Michael Cowen laminates this view by arguing that, in Central Province the intervention of an international layer of capital held back African capitalism (Cowen, 1975, 122). That is how in these and related avenues, international capital limited the scope for rural development (Ibid). In Sirisia particularly, tobacco production could not fit into the local agricultural system. Secondly, the vibrancy of peasant economy in Sirisia through domestication of livestock, cultivation of coffee, sunflower, cotton, onions and tomatoes could not endear peasants to commercial tobacco cultivation. The fact is that, their economy was dynamic and adequately satisfied their subsistence. Thirdly, was the impact of international capital which had an impetus to the exploitation of African households. That is how we can account for the late acceptability of tobacco as a cash crop.

These explanations notwithstanding, a far more complex pattern emerges in the case of the attempts to spur tobacco growing in Sirisia. Rather than one of the factors determining the outcome of the experiment, all were at play. The response of peasants to tobacco growing greatly influenced its outcome and so did the actions of local and international capital. But the actions of the colonial state had the greatest impact, causing the infant tobacco industry in Maxon’s own words to ‘go up in smoke’ in Western Kenya (Maxon, 111-139). Accordingly then, it is important to note that:

*The campaign to foster tobacco production for the manufacture of cigarettes in western Kenya formed part of the colonial state’s response to the great depression. In order to rescue the settler-oriented colonial economy from disaster and reduce the potential for African discontent, the colonial state sought to stimulate increased production and sale of agricultural produce from peasant households (Talbot, 1990, 15-28).*

Unlike crops such as coffee or tea which had the potential for export earnings, tobacco was introduced as a cash crop primarily for import substitution. By the 1930s, cigarette and other tobacco products constituted almost 4 per cent of almost all the total imports of Kenya and Uganda (Maxon, 1992). Therefore, the ensuing years saw the introduction of land reforms, as well as cash crops, coupled with increased commercialisation of smallholder agriculture.

This was envisaged as a solution to both poverty and hunger at local and national levels. From 1961 government policy however extended the logic of the Swynnerton Plan (Barkhan,1984,199-232.,Heyer, Maltha, & Senga,1976). Even agricultural research took the same route, focusing on the development of a high-yielding variety of cash crops (Johnston, 1989, 205-264). Thus, the case of commercialisation of tobacco in Sirisia was in line with this perspective.

Unlike the impact of coffee and tea production to the peasantry and economic development, the viability of tobacco cultivation has had negative manifestations and is critical in the case of Sirisia. They include overdependence on tobacco, destruction of the local (subsistence) economy, soil erosion and debt bondage through contract farming. Critical analysis of the economic impact of tobacco in this locality could be drawn from coffee production in Brazil (Baud &Koonings,1999) and Costa Rica, and on a more modest scale, from tobacco in Colombia and the Dominican Republic (Gudmundson,1989.,Palacios,1980.,Seligson,1980). In Sao Paulo, for instance, small-scale agriculture and the constitution of local and regional networks of petty trade and manufacturing determined the industrial take-off alongside the conventional large-scale coffee plantations and related commercial and financial interests(Font,1990,74.,Pesavento,1983).This paper draws from the complexity and fragmented nature of the cash crop-oriented development in Kenya from the first decade of independence and conceptualization of tobacco monopoly among the peasants in Sirisia, through a historical analysis of the activities of BAT.

### **The Entry of BAT and the Development of Exotic Tobacco, to the 1970s**

The initiative to grow tobacco in Kenya would not have been achieved without the government embarking on the trial and experimentation of cash crops in rural areas to boost income and generate government revenue. The government in partnership with BAT began a countrywide survey for the suitability of the tobacco crop. A report in this connection thus read:

*The Kenya Government, in the person of the Director of Agriculture, Mr. P.A. Mirie during various meeting with British-America Tobacco Company (Kenya) Ltd has expressed its profound interest in the establishment of a domestic tobacco industry-an industry in which there would be maximum co-operation between Government and the tobacco companies and in which all emphasis would be on the production of quality tobacco in sufficient quantities to satisfy the need of the Kenya industry (Tob/Cult/1).*

It was argued that, it would be quite impractical to visit all districts and areas in Kenya to examine each, minutely, on the ground, before deciding on the potential of any area for tobacco production. Thus, the problems that faced the introduction of commercial tobacco cultivation in Sirisia are viewed in the context of the wider historiography of tobacco in Kenya and international forces that often dictated and shaped the existence of the peasantry.

The tobacco industry in Kenya as it is today was the creation of the BAT.Co, a Multinational with 81 cigarette factories in 64 countries (KNA: gp. 633.7096762). It is one of the largest agro-based industries in Kenya with widespread economic activities ranging from on-farm activities, processing, manufacturing and distributions (Ibid). The BAT Group first entered Kenya in 1907 and set up a marketing organization operating from a depot in Mombasa. BAT's major pre-occupation then, was to build a distribution and marketing network throughout East Africa and Eastern Congo. This was largely determined by the good communication network and availability of locally grown "kali" tobaccos in Kenya (Maxon, 1992).

Prior to 1928, BAT operated as a branch marketing imported cigarettes years, but in that year in response to the developing market for cigarettes, BAT undertook its first investment in manufacturing in East Africa. Under corrugated iron sheets, the company opened its first factory in Jinja in Uganda because of good communication network and availability of locally grown "kali" tobaccos in Uganda (BAT, 6). In 1948, the Jinja factory was completely reconstructed and updated. It thus became the Group's first modern cigarette factory in East Africa. In November 1949, BAT Group acquired the East African Tobacco Company, which started business in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in 1932 and which set up a modern cigarette factory in Kampala. The East African Tobacco Company Limited (EAT) was to become the main operating Company for BAT Group for the next 15 years. In the early 1950s, a decision was undertaken to construct a modern cigarette and tobacco manufacturing complex in Nairobi to serve special needs of the growing Kenyan market (Ibid). A factory was thus opened at the site of BAT Kenya's present headquarters on Likoni Road in Nairobi in 1956 and fullscale manufacturing followed a year later. In the same year (1956), BAT further expanded and acquired the Rift Valley Cigarette Company, which owned a factory in Nakuru. As a result Nakuru for some time became the main centre for the manufacture of shag and smoking tobacco in East Africa (Ibid).

In 1965, in an apparent response to the political changes in East Africa, the East Africa Tobacco Company went into voluntary liquidation and three separate Companies were set up in each of the three East African Countries. As a general reorganization within the BAT Group in East Africa, the assets and liabilities of EAT were transferred to Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Thus, EAT was reconstructed leading to the formation of three Companies, namely BAT (Kenya) Ltd, EAT (Uganda) Ltd and BAT (Tanzania) Ltd (Ibid). In July 1966, Rothmans of Pall Mall (Kenya) Ltd was formed and after a short spell of unsuccessful competition with BAT Kenya, Rothmans made an offer to BAT its entire capital in November 1967. The name of the company was subsequently changed to Kenya Tobacco Company (KTC) Ltd (Ibid). BAT in its present form is the culmination of over 60 years trading by different participants in the tobacco and cigarette business in Kenya. From a relatively modest beginning, the company's business increased steadily replacing almost entirely all cigarette and other tobacco products previously imported.

The promotion of tobacco cultivation in Western Kenya began in the 1930s with the colonial authority's policy of encouraging cash crop production among African small scale land holders (peasants). Initial tobacco growth was in smaller quantities in the central areas of Kenya, Sagana and Kitui since the 1930s, and at Ena in Mbeere District from the 1950s. This trend, however, was to change in the 1940s. As already indicated, cash crop production in Kenya, was purely a continuation of the colonial post war policies of increased production, compelling Africans to produce raw materials such as sisal, tobacco, tea, rubber, among others for European industries. Consequently, the introduction of cash crops such as tobacco was not the priority of agricultural officers in the field. For instance, in Western Kenya, prevention of soil erosion and conservation of soil fertility took first place in agricultural work at the end of Second World War (KNA: AGR/KSM/1/497, 1937). This accounted for relative small-scale tobacco production in the 1940s and on contract in the 1960s and 1970s. Besides, the possibility of reducing foreign exchange used for imports to tobacco products, the development of cigarette industry for the domestic market offered the state an opportunity to increase its revenues at a time when it faced serious budgetary difficulties (Maxon 1992).

For the Department of Agriculture, the establishment of tobacco as a cash crop meant the introduction of new varieties, better suited to cigarette manufacture than those grown as part of the existing pattern of household production, and the establishment of a factory to manufacture cigarettes (KNA:AGR/KSM/1/986). The acting Deputy Director (Plant Industry) called for greater emphasis on tobacco in African agriculture, insisting that the first step was improvement of quality (Ibid). In addition, the Kenya Government held that, it would be relatively cheap and easy to induce an entrepreneur to start a cigarette making operation. In April 1939, the government adopted strict regulation of tobacco growing for the prevention of disease and exhaustion of soil fertility. The potential of tobacco as a cash crop in western Kenya was therefore not fulfilled. But its production by peasant households was feasible, as it was already grown for domestic use.

Among the reasons for this failure, were the actions of the state. In seeking to develop tobacco growing in parts of Western Kenya, the state followed policies characteristic of neither African agricultural practice nor capitalist agriculture. A huge measure of state control, pressure and coercion marked the cultivation and curing processes. Insistence on initiating planting in communal plots, limitations on the size of holdings and preference for sitting fields to facilitate government inspection became part of the system of suffocating state control. The system was not popular and required pressure from chiefs, headmen and agricultural officers to up the campaign. The state's role in marketing also had a negative impact. There was division between the Nyanza provincial administration (of which Sirisia was part and parcel) and the headquarters of the department of Agriculture as to the firm, local or multinational, which should be allowed to buy cured leaf and manufacture cigarettes (KNA: PC/NZA/2/12/49, 1939). This divided purpose curtailed the growth of the young tobacco industry.

Apart from colonial post war policies of increased production, tobacco was also introduced as part of the colonial government's response to the great depression. According to Maxon, the depression led to a significant drop in export earnings and nearly brought the colonial economy on the verge of collapse (Maxon, 1992, 72). The government fell back on the increasing African production as a major source of revenue to save the colonial state from bankruptcy. It began to encourage the expansion of cash crop cultivation in African reserves. Talbott (1990) identifies two goals for this increased interest in African agriculture. The first goal of this new emphasis on African agriculture was to provide a market for European production, particularly by displacing food crops and increasing cash income to African farmers so that they would have the ability to purchase relatively higher priced and internationally uncompetitive European grown corn and wheat.

The second goal was to increase African production so that economies of scale could be secured for European farmers which, by combining the two, would permit Kenya's crops to be more cost-effective and have greater clout on world markets (Talbot, 84).

Against this background, Agricultural officers in Nyanza, Coast, Central and North Nyanza (later Western) Provinces were directed by their superiors in Nairobi to promote tobacco cultivation in their areas (Maxon, 1994). In Nyanza, the initial promotion, involving farmer selection, establishment of nurseries from which farmers could get seedlings and extension advice by the agricultural officers were first undertaken in North Nyanza regions around Bukura. Colonial agricultural officers expected that peasants would easily adopt the crop since it was already being grown for local consumption. These expectations were not borne out. Maxon argues that, the unregulated competition between international capital represented by the BAT and local capital represented by local trading companies such as Colonial Tobacco Company (CTC), Hoima Cotton Company (HCC) and Hoima Tobacco Company (HTC) led to an unreliable market situation with farmers not sure of market for their tobacco (Ibid).

Peasants' interest in tobacco was further dampened by a wide range of state regulation on its cultivation. First, new varieties considered better suited to cigarette manufacturing than those grown locally were introduced, although the agricultural officer noted that the farmers "were very conservative about new strains." (Maxon, 1992, 114). To produce quality tobacco, farmers were only allowed to cultivate a given acreage in communal plots under the colonial chiefs rather than on their own farms. Such restrictions were imposed because the colonial officers had little faith in the peasants' initiative and farming practices. Cultivating tobacco on the communal plots allowed the officers to easily use chiefs and headmen to effect their control and regulations that aimed at ensuring quality tobacco. Peasants responded to the uncertainty of the market and the various state regulations for quality control by their decision not to grow the crop. By 1942, it was clear that promoting tobacco cultivation in Nyanza including North Nyanza was not succeeding and the colonial government's interest in the crop had also waned. It was not until three decades later that BAT started active promotion of the crop in Nyanza and Western province including Bungoma-Busia which Sirisia is part and parcel.

In 1969, BAT became a public company with the acquisition of shares by both the Kenya Government and the general public. Generally, tobacco cultivation in Kenya was indeed limited in terms of scope in the period before the 1970s. It was against this background that experiments were carried out to identify suitable areas for tobacco growth. But BAT Company which at the beginning used the government to spearhead its crop campaign sought an early partnership and this was preceded to as many districts:

*We were, therefore, guided first by various climatological data, geographical features and by different aspects of the soil, especially soil texture. To this we added our knowledge of Kenya, the knowledge gained, in Kenya, over the years, by various members of the Company's Leaf Departments in the three East African territories and our own experience of tobacco growing in other countries of the world. We were also greatly helped by the many members of the Department of Agriculture whom we met during the surveys (Annual Report. 1961).*

The partnership seems to have been accepted remotely since at every meeting the BAT and the Director of Agriculture was involved. Here, it was stressed that the sole interest of the Government was in the production of quality tobacco. Much of this tobacco would not be flue-cured and was dictated by the preference of the Kenyan smoker. It was known from the Ministry of Agriculture that the best flue-cured tobacco was to be grown on acid to neutral, open textured good, draining soils; "black tobacco" soils rather common in Kenya that produce a most undesirable flue-cured tobacco leaf. Alkaline soils yield an equally unimpressive, poor quality product. Therefore, the expedition started and each area was critiqued on the basis of its potentiality.

Starting with Kericho District, as a tobacco potential area, it was argued that, it was slopy and had a high altitude, predominantly a tea area and could probably not form a good base for tobacco. For Kisii and Western particularly Kakamega, it was observed, had some of the finest examples of consolidated land holdings perfectly ideal for tobacco production although the report pointed out that the farmers there were obviously and extremely already engaged in the production of various food crops and coffee that competed tobacco. Land pressure was another impediment to the production of tobacco. For North Nyanza, particularly Bungoma-Busia, Sirisia included, the Government-BAT committee argued that; "it was in the area and particularly in the valleys of rivers, that we see the best operation for tobacco growing" (KNA/BV/7/7). Finally, the area was identified and experiments were done on flue/fire-cured tobacco.

Serious tobacco trials in Sirisia began in 1975 by BAT in consultation with the Ministry of Agriculture (Oyoo, Tr/1/125). At this time BAT Kenya began spearheading tobacco development in Kenya including Sirisia. At first, only a small acreage was planted by peasant growers, each growing 1/8 acre on trial basis. This was in response to an earlier observation by Ensoil in the *East African Standard*:

*A diversification of a crop about which little was heard was tobacco, which seems surprising in view of established of major tobacco industry, but the fact was that, Kenya was a poor tobacco growing country and the majority of the leaf used by BAT Company for processing in the republic was imported from Tanzania and Uganda...recent experiment carried out by BAT...shows, that fire-cured tobacco from this area may eventually replace imports from Uganda (cited in the East African Standard, October 31, 1969).*

The BAT Leaf Manager, Mr. Harrington, indicated that there was room to develop tobacco to cut off its imports. But this would take seven to ten years to develop the area to its full potential as far as tobacco was concerned. As a result, the government went ahead with the next stage of the scheme, namely to transfer the crop to smallholders. The government was to provide staff and finance for the scheme, while BAT provided expertise (KNA/BV/7/7).

Similarly, peasant tobacco growers were encouraged to develop their own seedlings and do their own processing by fire curing methods. This processing, as expected was likely to develop on a co-operative basis and ultimately BAT would only act as buyers. Therefore, fire-cured tobacco was to be adopted in Western and Eastern Nyanza, although the BAT Company had been carrying out experiments on burley air-cured tobacco hoping for better leaf production.

At this time, the demand for tobacco cultivation among peasants increased dramatically. BAT and the government provided staff as well as training and testing proposals on the initial centres and on expansion. The emergence of tobacco created a new order in agriculture as a number of households in Sirisia underwent an economic change. The peasantry in Sirisia, whose economy was based on mixed farming, in the words of Kweyuh:

*Found themselves up against a system of debilitating financial system which they had to deal with at least in the next three decades. They were to be trapped into producing a cash crop that promised little but continued debt and poverty (Kweyuh,4).*

Sirisia finally became a popular destination for production of the tobacco crop under the auspices of BAT. BAT organised tobacco production on the concept of contract farming a system whereby schemes or companies use small holder growers to produce cash crops (Otieno,1998,72). BAT was the third foreign Company to use the contract system in Western Kenya after Tea and Sugar (Buch-Hansen & Marcussen,1982, 23).The first tobacco growers selected to grow the crop included among others: Joseph Kutete of Butonge, Bonface Wafula of Bukokholo and Wanikina of Mwalie. Later the District Officer was able to report *that*:

*About ten growers have been selected to grow tobacco, the first step BAT was extending tobacco farms to this area, there are government agricultural instructors attached to this project (KNA/DC/KGM /2/21/22, 1969.).*

BAT intensified tobacco growth campaigns in Sirisia by establishing nurseries at Malakisi which employed a number of school leavers as Leaf Technicians. To encourage adoption, the seedlings produced were freely distributed to growers. Malakisi was selected for the establishment of a Leaf Buying Centre and subsequently, became the headquarters of the BAT Company in the Bungoma-Busia tobacco hub.

There were two varieties of tobacco grown in Sirisia: the flue and fire-cured varieties, both of which required heavy fertilizer application. The flue-cured variety mainly uses heat passed through aluminium pipes inside a stuffed house. A lot of wood therefore was required to provide fire and heat. Furthermore, heat and humidity control was extremely crucial. This necessitates a 24-hour watch over the whole process involving regular checking and adjustment to the furnaces on an hourly basis (KNA/BV/7/7, 1965-1985.). It was only after curing that tobacco was graded. Growers were paid better for grade one than for grade two. On the other hand, for the fire-cured variety, heavy smoke was brought into direct contact with the leaves, which turn dark brown. Smoke from burning leaves and green wood gives tobacco a pungent flavour and distinctive aroma as well as improving its preserving qualities. Both fire and flue-cured tobacco leaves were harvested when fully ripe, and were then hung in tiers in a barn and allowed to yellow for about seven days before curing takes place.



After an initial year of difficulty, peasants in Sirisia mastered the techniques of organisation and production of tobacco. Government support was in terms of extension, while the BAT Company provided credit facilities (KNA/AE/22/216, 1956-1971). Growers were responsible for growing, harvesting and curing their own crop, but these activities and the acreage were strictly controlled by BAT management. The latter had the authority to recruit and discipline individual peasant growers even barring undesirable ones from continued tobacco farming (Ibid). According to an informant in Bukokholo, the nurseries for tobacco seedlings and land preparation were organised by BAT management on a centralised basis (OI, Daniel Matanda Wekesa, July 29, 2009).

As noted, before 1975, the bulk of the leaf used in Kenyan manufactured cigarettes and pipe tobacco was grown in Tanzania and Uganda. However, as a result of a countrywide research programme, BAT Kenya embarked on an accelerated programme in developing the growing of leaf tobacco in Kenya with the take-off period in Sirisia being in 1975 (*The East African Standard*, August 7, 1977.). At present, BAT-Kenya alone has over 20,000 registered small holder growers in Kenya cultivating about 6,000 hectares of tobacco (KNA: gp. 633.7096762). By 1997, a small but vibrant competitor, Mastermind Tobacco Kenya Ltd, had 5000 contracted growers barely five years since it commenced operations (Ibid). To facilitate increased leaf tobacco output, BAT Kenya established local centres in the tobacco growing areas as focal points in its leaf development programme. The infrastructure provided by these centres was designed to provide the base for supplying material inputs, provision of agricultural extension services and to facilitate the buying of and direct payment for cured leaf. The main centres of operation are located at Malakisi in Bungoma/Busia, Mitunguu in Meru, Oyani, Rongo, Suba Kuria in Kuria, and at Ena in Mbeere District. In the case of Sirisia, therefore, the 1970s saw a steady expansion of tobacco in terms of acreage and a dramatic increase in the number of tobacco growers for both flue-cured and fire-cured tobacco (KNA/BV/9/31).

This expansion was perhaps the consequence of the enthusiasm of BAT and government agricultural officials. The successful entry of BAT in to Sirisia, Bungoma County, however, could also be attributed to the need by the peasants for money to meet daily obligations and government support to make tobacco cultivation a policy for rural development (KNA:gp.633.7096762). The government targeted tobacco because it was hoped tobacco would turn round the dwindling economy and transform the rural areas as it had been envisaged in the Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965. By the end of 1976, the government-BAT partnership in experimentation on tobacco growing, yellowing and curing were regular in Sirisia. Tobacco had, indeed permeated the psychology and social life of the peasants. There was therefore, a steady expansion of tobacco in terms of acreage. Tobacco was not only just a crop as almost everything on the growers revolved around it. Even the calendar they used to mark their days revolved around the planting, weeding and curing of the tobacco crop. It took a year to produce a good tobacco crop, and, to a large extent, the worth of the crop depended upon the grower's skill and experience.

However, tobacco production was not without anxieties and dangers. The peasant grower ran the risk of crop failure, loss from improper curing and frequency of hail stones (Ibid). This detailed attention implied a tobacco grower had to cultivate less acreage. In addition, like other agricultural products, tobacco was greatly affected by different weather spells. A dry spell for example, delayed planting. On the other hand, an extreme wet spell drowned the tobacco and ruined the crop through spotting of leaves. For example in 1976, the harvest of the crop took place between March and June. The delayed long rains that year and late transplanting resulted in less acreage of fire-cured tobacco planted against the BAT target. Seedbeds were similarly sown late, owing to lack of seeds.

Certainly, the success of tobacco cultivation brought initial economic prosperity to the peasantry in Sirisia. Without tobacco peasants *could have been left to subsistence farming. That, peasants could grow tobacco to pay off debts and other utilities, implied a high demand for tobacco as a means of stabilizing the economy (Ibid).* **Therefore, the story of tobacco cultivation in Sirisia as from 1975 is one of tobacco with peasants in which.** This peasants were accustomed to tobacco growth and competed to tender the peculiar needs of the crop save for a few. Reliance on tobacco to the extent that it could be trusted to replace the economic and social role of livestock, coffee and other agricultural pursuits demonstrated its pre-eminence in Sirisia. Five years after *eraba* as it was called in the local dialect had been introduced, it had enormous impact on peasant livelihoods. It provided them with work, refreshed their leisure hours, paid their wages, bride price among others. The manner of production, however, committed them to a social model which set them on a course of conflict with BAT and among themselves.

According to Martin Mukholi, a technician with BAT, Company and government tailored tobacco growing guidelines were key in tobacco (OI, Martin Mukholi, October 28, 2010). At the beginning BAT imported US experts to transfer the technique of producing flue-cured tobacco to local growers. In this case, the BAT technical experts in Sirisia were secondary school leavers whom BAT thought had the ability to listen to experts' advice (Ibid). These experts trained the first cadre of contract tobacco growers. Later, BAT sponsored training of technicians at Egerton College and in the United Kingdom (Ibid). Many former tobacco growers recall with nostalgia the age when these technicians were living in Sirisia riding new motorcycles and *often* travelled widely for business and pleasure at Company expense (OI, James Waboelela, October 2, 2009). Between 1979 and 1995 BAT reported tremendous improvement in the growth of flue-cured tobacco in Bungoma-Busia particularly in Sirisia (KNA/AE/22/2IS). The trend was further heightened **in the ensuing years upto the years 2005.**

### Conclusion

This paper has provided a historical review of tobacco production in Sirisia, Bungoma County. It has analysed how tobacco, as an agricultural commodity played a crucial role in Sirisia social relations and economy between 1975 and 2005. The paper argued that, tobacco production in Sirisia predates the colonial era and emphasised that tobacco is indeed indigenous to Sirisia. Further, it has examined the entry of exotic tobacco in Kenya which began in the colonial period as one of the pioneer cash crops. The paper has pointed out that before 1975, Bukusu economy demonstrated qualities of diversity, dynamism, vibrancy and a sustained self regenerated growth. But with tobacco commercialization taking root from 1975, the traditional social, economic and political structures of the peasants in Sirisia were superimposed on capitalist-oriented structures and institutions aimed at tobacco production at the expense of other agricultural pursuits.

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