

Organization and development of Kikuyu agriculture, 1880-1920

Muchoki, F.M.

The study focuses on the organization and development of Kikuyu agriculture in Kiambu District between the years 1880-1920. It investigates the internal dynamics and innovative changes that characterized Kikuyu agriculture in these years. It examines the indigenous principles through which the Kikuyu farmers interpreted, predicted and intervened in the natural environment. It also examines the local social organization and the external political and economic factors, which affected the Kikuyu agricultural system in these years. It is argued that Kikuyu agriculture whose organization was complex underwent major structural changes and was capable of initiating and accepting novel practices. In this study, we do not enquire about traditional systems to glorify them as halcyon days, but rather we are seeking to establish Kikuyu possession of knowledge about environment and ecology and the adaptation that the Kikuyu have made to them. We are interested in understanding how the Kikuyu agricultural system functioned in order to understand how it has been transformed. Recent theoretical formulation of colonial agriculture especially the dependency accounts, while correct in essential respects, are seen to have certain shortcomings. As Zeleza (1983, 162) has pointed out, "Writers are so overwhelmed by the structural forces of colonial state pressures against the peasants, that in the final analysis, they lose sight of the peasants, that is, how they have struggled against, adapted to and conditioned the penetration and subsequent development of capitalism in peripheral areas". Despite the dominance of settler farming, Kikuyu commodity production and agricultural output increased rapidly. However, while the establishment of colonial rule was to provide new opportunities for some Kikuyu to expand their trade and agricultural output, "it was also to hinder and in some cases to ruin certain traditional patterns of agriculture" (Zeleza 1983, 162). Colonialism not only drastically altered the social and political organization of the Kikuyu but it also altered the ecological organization. This study will examine the nature of this reorganization.