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SAVING THE COW: THE COLONIAL ECONOMY AMONG THE KIPSIGIS, 1900-1960

Abstract

The importance of the cow to the precolonial Kipsigis of Kenya, both culturally and economically, was inestimable as it was invaluable. The “cow” was the hub of the Kipsigis precolonial economy, culture and politics. Wealth and social status were approximatable to the size of one’s herd. Social and economic ties were reinforced through cattle sharing and exchange. And increasing one’s herd was the driving desire of every Kipsigndet (Kipsigis man). All this was disrupted by the implantation of colonial capitalist among the Kipsigis at the turn of the nineteenth century. Colonial capitalism had little regard and need for animals and set to systematical depastoralise the Kipsigis through land alienation, labour conscription and tax imposition. Cattle became the target of every manner of “crime” and misdemeanour committed by the kipsigis people, be it nonpayment of tax, labour evasion and/or desertion to domestic crimes. Settlement of crimes and payment of fines were done in the form of cattle. Yet the cow remained the cherishable asset among the Kipsigis. To avert the depletion of their cattle and and even to replenish their stock, the Kipsigis who in 1906 resisted the introduction of maize production, gradually embarrassed dictates and avenues of colonial capitalism for the sole purpose of saving their cows. The Kipsigis to crop (maize) production, engaged in colonial labour and sought to improve their livelihoods with the cow as the motivating factor. By 1960, the colonialists came to the realization that in the Kipsigisland “everything[development] was tied to the tail of a cow” This paper seeks to explore the historical processes that transformed the Kipsigis colonial landscape and the attendant changes that characterized the entrenchment of a mixed economy in the region between 1900 and 1960.

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