

The Historical Emergence and Institutionalization of Smallholder Tea Farming in Kipsigis Land, Kenya (1924-1963)

Paulo Kipngetch Koech* | **Winy C. Ngeno Koech** | **Dr. Kemboi Cherop, PhD** | **Dr. Kemboi Cherop, PhD** | **Dr. Isaya Oduor Onjala, PhD** | **Dr. George Odhiambo, PhD**

¹Department of Social Studies School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology

²Department of Sociology, Gender and Development School of Law, Arts and Social Studies Kenyatta University

³Department of Humanities, Social Science and Physical Education and Sports School of Education Koitaleel Samoei University College

⁴Department of Social Studies School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology

⁵Department of Social Studies School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology Email: odhiamboGeorge68@gmail.com

*Correspondence Author

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to trace the historical emergence and institutionalization of smallholder tea farming in Kipsigis land between 1924 and 1963 under colonial administration. This study examines how colonial agricultural policies, land alienation, and labor recruitment systems facilitated the introduction of tea cultivation while initially excluding African farmers from direct participation. Using a historical qualitative research design, data were collected through oral interviews with 61 respondents, archival research at Kenya National Archives, and analysis of colonial administrative records. The findings reveal that tea farming was introduced in 1924 as a settler enterprise but gradually incorporated African participation through labor migration and eventual smallholder schemes beginning in 1954. The research demonstrates how colonial restrictions on African cash crop cultivation were gradually relaxed through the Swynnerton Plan, leading to the establishment of pilot tea schemes that laid the foundation for post-independence smallholder tea production. This study contributes to understanding colonial agricultural development policies and their long-term impacts on rural African communities. The significance lies in documenting how colonial exclusion and subsequent inclusion shaped the institutional framework of Kenya's tea industry and influenced rural livelihoods in the post-independence period.

Key Terms: colonial agriculture, tea farming, Swynnerton Plan, smallholder development, Kipsigis, institutional change

Introduction:

The development of commercial tea production in colonial Kenya represents a paradigmatic example of how colonial agricultural policies simultaneously promoted European settler interests while systematically excluding African farmers from lucrative cash crop enterprises. In Kipsigis land, located in Kenya's South Rift Valley, the introduction of tea farming in 1924 initiated a complex process of agricultural transformation that would eventually reshape rural livelihoods and social structures throughout the region.

The period between 1924 and 1963 witnessed the establishment of large-scale European tea plantations, the development of processing infrastructure, and the gradual incorporation of African farmers into tea production through carefully controlled institutional arrangements (Korir, 1976). This transformation occurred within the broader context of colonial agricultural policy that prioritized settler farming while restricting African participation in cash crop production through various legal and administrative mechanisms.

The colonial government's justification for excluding Africans from tea cultivation centered on arguments about quality control, technical capacity, and the need for large-scale production to achieve economies of scale (Talbot, 1992). However, these restrictions also served to protect European economic interests and ensure adequate labor supply for settler estates. The eventual inclusion of African farmers through the Swynnerton Plan of 1954 represented a significant shift in colonial policy, driven by political pressures and recognition of African agricultural capabilities.

This article examines the historical emergence and institutionalization of smallholder tea farming in Kipsigis land between 1924 and 1963, focusing on the complex interplay between colonial policies, African responses, and the gradual development of institutional frameworks that would define the post-independence tea sector. The study explores

how tea cultivation was introduced through European settlement schemes, how African knowledge of tea farming was acquired through labor migration, and how pilot smallholder schemes eventually challenged colonial restrictions on African cash crop production.

Colonial agriculture refers to the system of agricultural production established under European colonial rule, characterized by settler privilege, export orientation, and the subordination of African farming systems to European interests (Rodney, 1972). Smallholder tea farming describes small-scale tea cultivation by African farmers, typically on plots of less than five acres, organized through cooperative institutions and contract farming arrangements (Omwoyo, 2000).

The paper contributes to understanding how colonial agricultural policies shaped rural development trajectories and how African communities navigated restrictions to eventually gain access to cash crop production. It demonstrates the importance of institutional change in facilitating agricultural transformation while highlighting the lasting impacts of colonial exclusion on rural social structures.

Literature Related to Colonial Agricultural Development and Tea Farming

Colonial Agricultural Policy in Kenya:

Colonial agricultural policy in Kenya was fundamentally shaped by the need to establish profitable European farming while ensuring adequate labor supply for settler enterprises. Wolff (1974) argues that the colonial state's primary function was creating conditions for capital accumulation by European settlers, which required both land appropriation and labor mobilization from African communities.

The legal framework for colonial agriculture was established through a series of ordinances beginning with the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1902, which declared all "unoccupied" land as Crown property available for European settlement (Sorrenson, 1967). Subsequent legislation

including the Native Authority Ordinance and various agricultural regulations created a dual system that privileged European farming while restricting African agricultural development. Van Zwabenberg (1975) demonstrates how colonial agricultural policy deliberately created conditions favoring European production through protective tariffs, subsidized inputs, preferential credit access, and marketing arrangements that excluded African farmers. The colonial state justified these arrangements through discourses about African agricultural incapacity and the need for "civilizing" influences through wage labor on European farms.

However, colonial policy was not monolithic and evolved over time in response to changing economic conditions, political pressures, and African resistance. Brett (2003) identifies several phases in colonial agricultural development, including initial settler establishment (1902-1920), consolidation and expansion (1920-1940), and gradual African incorporation (1940-1963), each characterized by different approaches to African agricultural participation.

Tea Industry Development in Colonial Kenya:

The tea industry in Kenya developed within the broader framework of colonial agricultural policy but exhibited specific characteristics that distinguished it from other cash crops. Acland (1971) documents how tea cultivation began experimentally in 1903 but did not achieve commercial viability until the 1920s when favorable international market conditions and improved processing technology made large-scale production profitable. The establishment of tea estates in Kericho was facilitated by ideal agro-ecological conditions including high altitude, volcanic soils, and reliable rainfall patterns that produced high-quality tea suitable for international markets (Korir, 1976). European tea companies, particularly Brooke Bond and James Finlay, invested heavily in estate development and processing infrastructure, creating an integrated production system that dominated the industry for several decades.

Colonial restrictions on African tea cultivation were justified through arguments about quality control and economies of scale. The Tea Ordinance and related regulations prohibited African farmers from growing tea commercially, ostensibly to prevent disease transmission and maintain export quality standards (Chesang, 2009). However, these restrictions also served to protect European investments and ensure adequate labor supply for estate operations.

The institutional framework governing tea production included the Kenya Tea Growers Association (established 1920s), processing facilities owned by multinational companies, and marketing arrangements through London auctions that linked Kenya production to global markets (Omwoyo, 2000). This framework excluded African farmers from both production and value-added activities, concentrating economic benefits among European settlers and international companies.

Labor Systems and African Agricultural Knowledge:

African participation in colonial tea farming initially occurred through labor migration to European estates, where workers acquired knowledge of tea cultivation, processing, and management techniques. Stichter (1982) describes how colonial labor policies including taxation, land alienation, and the kipande system forced African men into wage employment on settler farms.

Working conditions on tea estates were characterized by low wages, poor housing, and strict supervision, but they also provided opportunities for skill acquisition and exposure to commercial agricultural practices (Daniels, 1980). African workers learned tea husbandry techniques including pruning, plucking, fertilizer application, and pest management that would later prove valuable when smallholder tea schemes were established.

The squatter system allowed some African families to settle on European estates in exchange for labor obligations, providing opportunities for

women and children to gain familiarity with tea farming alongside traditional subsistence activities (Kanogo, 1987). These arrangements created hybrid production systems that combined wage labor with subsistence farming and facilitated knowledge transfer between European and African agricultural practices.

African agricultural knowledge was often undervalued by colonial administrators who viewed traditional farming practices as inferior to European methods. However, Mackenzie (1991) demonstrates how African farmers actively adapted and modified introduced techniques to suit local conditions and household needs, creating innovative farming systems that combined traditional and modern practices.

The Swynnerton Plan and African Agricultural Development:

The Swynnerton Plan of 1954 represented a fundamental shift in colonial agricultural policy toward greater African participation in cash crop production. Swynnerton (1954) argued that African agricultural development was essential for political stability and economic growth, requiring land tenure reform, technical assistance, and market access for African farmers. The plan's implementation involved several key components including land consolidation and registration, introduction of cash crops, establishment of agricultural credit facilities, and development of cooperative marketing arrangements (Kitching, 1980). These reforms were designed to create a class of progressive African farmers who would support colonial rule while providing political alternatives to nationalist movements.

Tea farming was identified as particularly suitable for African smallholder development due to its labor-intensive nature, suitability for small plots, and potential for providing regular income (Sorensen, 1988). Pilot tea schemes were established in selected areas including Kimulot in Kericho District, where African farmers were given access to seedlings, technical training, and guaranteed markets through processing arrangements with European estates. The

Swynnerton Plan's emphasis on individual land tenure and cash crop production represented a deliberate attempt to transform African agricultural systems from subsistence to commercial orientation (Elkins, 2005). This transformation had profound implications for land use patterns, labor allocation, and social structures in affected communities, creating new forms of inequality while providing economic opportunities for some farmers.

Institutional Change and Agricultural Transformation:

The development of smallholder tea farming required the creation of new institutional arrangements to support African farmers who lacked access to capital, technical knowledge, and marketing infrastructure. North (1990) defines institutions as formal and informal rules governing economic behavior, emphasizing their importance in reducing transaction costs and facilitating economic development.

In the context of smallholder tea development, institutional innovations included the establishment of specialized agricultural departments, formation of farmer cooperatives, development of extension services, and creation of processing and marketing arrangements tailored to small-scale production (Bates, 1989). These institutions were designed to overcome constraints facing African farmers while maintaining quality standards required for export markets. The Special Crops Development Authority (SCDA), established under the Swynnerton Plan, played a crucial role in coordinating smallholder tea development through provision of seedlings, technical assistance, and marketing services (Heyer, 1976). This organization later evolved into the Kenya Tea Development Authority (KTDA), which became the primary institutional framework for smallholder tea production in post-independence Kenya. However, institutional development was constrained by colonial priorities and European interests. Berman (1990) argues that colonial institutions were designed to serve settler interests while providing minimal

benefits to African farmers, creating institutional legacies that continued to shape agricultural development in the post-independence period.

Methodology:

This study employed a historical qualitative research design to trace the emergence and institutionalization of smallholder tea farming in Kipsigis land between 1924 and 1963. The research utilized multiple data sources including oral history interviews, archival documents, and published historical accounts to reconstruct the complex process of agricultural transformation during the colonial period. The study was conducted in Kipsigis-inhabited areas of Kericho, Bomet, and Nakuru counties, specifically focusing on five sub-counties: Sotik, Konoin, Belgut, Bureti, and Kuresoi South. These areas were selected based on their historical significance as centers of early tea production and their role in colonial agricultural development schemes.

A total of 61 respondents participated in the study, comprising 51 pioneer farmers aged 60 years and above who had direct experience with early tea farming or whose families were involved in colonial tea schemes, 5 agricultural extension officers with knowledge of historical tea development, and 5 factory management personnel familiar with the evolution of tea processing facilities. Purposive sampling was employed to identify respondents with detailed knowledge of colonial tea farming, while snowball sampling helped locate additional informants with relevant historical experience. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews using thematic interview guides that focused on the introduction of tea farming, colonial agricultural policies, early African participation in tea cultivation, labor experiences on European estates, and the development of smallholder schemes. Interviews were conducted in local languages (Kalenjin) and later translated, with research assistants facilitating communication and cultural interpretation.

Archival research was conducted at the Kenya National Archives, focusing on colonial administrative records including district annual reports, agricultural department files, tea industry correspondence, and policy documents related to African agricultural development. Key archival sources included DC/KER series (District Commissioner Kericho files), agricultural gazettes, land commission reports, and correspondence between colonial officials regarding tea development policies. Secondary sources included published works by colonial administrators, early anthropological studies, government policy documents, and scholarly analyses of colonial agricultural development. Particular attention was paid to contemporary accounts of tea farming development and policy debates surrounding African participation in cash crop production.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns in colonial policy development, African responses to tea farming opportunities, and the evolution of institutional arrangements governing tea production. Data triangulation using multiple sources helped verify the accuracy of accounts and ensure comprehensive coverage of the historical period. The study maintained ethical standards by obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring confidentiality of sensitive information.

Results:

Introduction of Tea Farming to Kipsigis Land (1924-1945):

The introduction of commercial tea farming to Kipsigis land began in 1924 when large-scale European estates were established in the Kericho area following favorable international market conditions and improved processing technology. According to colonial records, the first commercial tea plantations were developed on land alienated from the Kipsigis through the Crown Lands Ordinance and subsequent land policies (KNA/DC/KER/1/10). The development of tea estates was facilitated by the ideal agro-ecological conditions in Kericho, including

volcanic soils, high altitude (1,500-2,200 meters), and reliable rainfall patterns exceeding 1,200mm annually. As one district officer noted in 1925, "The Kericho highlands possess all the natural advantages for tea cultivation that have made Ceylon and Assam famous" (KNA/DC/KER/1/2).

European tea companies, particularly Brooke Bond and James Finlay, acquired large tracts of land through the British East African Disabled Officers Corps (BEADOC) settlement scheme of 1919, which allocated approximately 25,000 acres of former Kipsigis territory for European farming enterprises (Duder, 1980). These companies invested heavily in estate development, processing infrastructure, and technical expertise to establish integrated tea production systems.

The institutional framework governing tea production was established through the Kenya Tea Growers Association (KTGA), formed in the 1920s to coordinate production quotas, maintain quality standards, and represent settler interests in policy discussions (KNA/DC/KER/1/10). The KTGA successfully lobbied for protective policies including import tariffs on foreign tea and restrictions on African cultivation to prevent disease transmission and maintain export quality. African farmers were explicitly prohibited from growing tea commercially under various colonial regulations. The Tea Ordinance and related agricultural legislation restricted tea cultivation to licensed European farmers, justified through arguments about technical requirements and quality control (Chesang, 2009). As stated in a 1930 agricultural report, "The cultivation of tea requires specialized knowledge and substantial capital investment that cannot be expected from native farmers" (KNA/DC/KER/6/1).

However, the establishment of tea estates created significant labor demand that was met primarily through African workers recruited from the Kipsigis and neighboring communities. Colonial labor policies including hut taxes, poll taxes, and the kipande system forced many Kipsigis men into wage employment on tea estates, where they acquired practical knowledge of tea cultivation

and processing techniques (Stichter, 1982). Working conditions on tea estates were characterized by low wages, poor housing, and strict supervision, but they provided opportunities for skill acquisition that would prove valuable in later smallholder development. As one elderly respondent recalled, "My father worked on the tea estate for many years. He learned how to prune tea, when to pluck the leaves, and how to keep the bushes healthy. This knowledge helped our family when we finally got our own tea" (OI/KER/BEL/11).

Labor Migration and Knowledge Acquisition (1924-1950):

The development of tea estates created extensive labor migration patterns that brought thousands of Kipsigis workers into direct contact with commercial tea farming. Colonial labor recruitment systems including the kipande pass system, taxation policies, and land alienation combined to create a steady supply of African workers for European estates (Van Zwanenberg, 1975). Labor migration patterns were shaped by seasonal agricultural calendars and household survival strategies. Young Kipsigis men typically migrated to tea estates during dry seasons when agricultural activities in the reserves were minimal, returning home during planting and harvesting periods to assist with subsistence farming (Daniels, 1980). This circular migration created ongoing connections between estates and rural communities.

The squatter system allowed some Kipsigis families to settle permanently on estate land in exchange for labor obligations, creating hybrid production systems that combined wage work with subsistence agriculture. Squatter families cultivated food crops on allocated plots while male household heads worked in tea production, enabling women and children to observe tea farming practices alongside their subsistence activities (Kanogo, 1987). Tea estate work exposed African laborers to modern agricultural techniques including pruning methods, plucking standards, fertilizer application, and pest

management practices. Workers learned that tea required careful maintenance including regular pruning every three years, selective plucking of "two leaves and a bud," and systematic fertilizer application to maintain soil fertility (Korir, 1976).

African workers also gained understanding of tea processing operations including withering, rolling, fermenting, and drying procedures that transformed fresh leaf into marketable tea. Although processing was controlled by European managers, African workers operated machinery and learned quality control standards required for export markets (Omwoyo, 2000). The acquisition of technical knowledge was facilitated by experienced African supervisors who had worked on estates for extended periods and could communicate effectively with new workers. These supervisors, known as *headmen* or *sirdars*, played crucial roles in knowledge transfer and became important intermediaries between European management and African labor (OI/KER/BUR/12). Knowledge transfer also occurred through informal networks among workers who shared experiences and techniques during rest periods and social gatherings. Workers from different estates exchanged information about varying practices and management approaches, creating a body of comparative knowledge about tea farming techniques (OI/BMT/KON/08).

Some African workers developed specialized skills in tea nursery management, grafting techniques, and disease control that made them valuable to estate management. These skilled workers often received higher wages and better treatment, creating incentives for knowledge acquisition and technical competence (OI/KER/BEL/03). The accumulation of tea farming knowledge among African workers created a foundation of technical capacity that would prove essential when opportunities for African tea cultivation finally emerged in the 1950s. As one agricultural officer noted, "By 1950, there were hundreds of Africans in the district who understood tea farming as well as any European farmer" (OI/KER/BUR/13).

Colonial Land Policies and Agricultural Restrictions (1902-1950):

Colonial land policies fundamentally shaped the agricultural landscape of Kipsigis territory through systematic appropriation of the most fertile areas for European settlement while confining African communities to designated reserves. The Crown Lands Ordinance of 1902 declared all "unoccupied" land as Crown property, providing legal justification for large-scale land alienation (Sorrenson, 1967). The establishment of the Kipsigis Native Reserve in 1907 concentrated the community on approximately 22% of their traditional territory while allocating the remaining 78% to European settlers, government purposes, and forest reserves (Kenya Land Commission, 1933). This land division was justified through colonial arguments about efficient land use and the need to protect African communities from land speculation.

Land alienation in Kipsigis territory occurred through several mechanisms including direct Crown allocation to settlers, the British East African Disabled Officers Corps (BEADOC) scheme, and private purchase arrangements facilitated by colonial legislation. The Londiani-Kipkelion area saw the establishment of 18 farms of 5,000 acres each for European settlement, while the Sotik region was allocated 130,000 acres for settler farming (Land Ordinance 859 Londiani Allotment File). Agricultural restrictions on African farmers were implemented through various ordinances that prohibited cultivation of profitable cash crops including tea, coffee, and pyrethrum. The Native Authority Ordinance gave colonial administrators broad powers to regulate African agricultural activities, justified through arguments about preventing disease transmission and maintaining export quality standards (Wolff, 1974).

The restriction on African tea cultivation was particularly significant given the crop's suitability to local conditions and potential for providing regular income. Colonial officials argued that tea required large-scale production and substantial

capital investment that African farmers could not provide, while also expressing concerns about disease control and quality maintenance (KNA/DC/KER/1/25). These restrictions were enforced through a system of agricultural licenses, inspections, and penalties that effectively excluded African farmers from lucrative cash crop markets. Agricultural officers conducted regular inspections of African farming areas to ensure compliance with cultivation restrictions and to promote approved crops such as maize (Brett, 2003).

The concentration of Kipsigis population in the Native Reserve created land pressure that intensified over time as population growth exceeded available agricultural land. By 1950, the average landholding in the reserve had declined to less than 10 acres per household, compared to European farms averaging over 1,000 acres (Kenya Land Commission, 1933). Land pressure in the reserves was exacerbated by colonial policies that prohibited expansion into adjacent areas and restricted access to traditional grazing lands and water sources. The loss of key resources including salt licks at Chematum and Maraboi created ongoing tensions between the Kipsigis and colonial authorities (KNA/DC/KER/3/18). The colonial land system also disrupted traditional tenure arrangements based on communal ownership and flexible use rights. The introduction of individual land titles and permanent boundaries conflicted with customary practices that allowed for seasonal adjustments and collective resource management (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991).

Early African Resistance and Adaptation (1924-1950):

African responses to colonial tea development in Kipsigis land included various forms of resistance, adaptation, and accommodation that reflected the complex dynamics of colonial agricultural transformation. Initial resistance focused on land alienation and labor recruitment policies that disrupted traditional livelihoods and social structures (Omwoyo, 2000). Land alienation for

tea estates provoked organized resistance from Kipsigis communities who lost access to traditional grazing areas, water sources, and sacred sites. In 1933, protests erupted when the colonial government attempted to alienate additional land at Kapkatet for commercial development, leading to arrests and fines for protest leaders (Kosgei, 1981).

Resistance to labor recruitment took various forms including evasion of tax collection, temporary migration to avoid forced labor, and work slowdowns on estates. Some Kipsigis families relocated to distant areas or across colonial boundaries to escape labor obligations, while others engaged in passive resistance through minimal compliance with colonial requirements (OI/BMT/STK/09). However, African responses also included adaptive strategies that took advantage of new opportunities while maintaining cultural integrity. Many Kipsigis men voluntarily sought employment on tea estates when wages were needed for tax payments or consumer goods, viewing wage labor as a temporary strategy rather than permanent lifestyle change (Daniels, 1980).

The acquisition of technical knowledge through estate work represented a form of strategic adaptation that prepared African farmers for future opportunities in tea cultivation. Workers deliberately observed and learned tea farming techniques while fulfilling labor obligations, recognizing the potential value of this knowledge for future application (OI/KER/BUR/10). Some African workers developed entrepreneurial activities that complemented estate employment, including small-scale trading, transport services, and food production for estate workers. These activities provided additional income while maintaining connections to traditional economic activities and social networks (Stichter, 1982).

African women developed adaptive strategies that balanced traditional responsibilities with new economic opportunities created by tea development. Women maintained subsistence production while men worked on estates, but they also engaged in market activities including food

sales, beer brewing, and crafts production for estate workers (OI/BMT/KON/11). Resistance and adaptation occurred within the context of ongoing cultural practices and social institutions that provided frameworks for interpreting and responding to colonial changes. Traditional leadership structures, kinship networks, and religious practices continued to influence African responses to tea development and colonial policies (Towett, 1979).

The persistence of traditional agricultural practices alongside colonial innovations created hybrid systems that combined indigenous knowledge with introduced techniques. African farmers continued subsistence production using traditional methods while selectively adopting colonial practices that enhanced productivity or provided economic advantages (Mackenzie, 1991).

The Swynnerton Plan: Policy Transformation and Establishment of Pilot Tea Schemes (1954-1963):

The Swynnerton Plan of 1954 represented a fundamental shift in colonial agricultural policy toward greater African participation in cash crop production, including tea farming. The plan emerged from recognition that African agricultural development was essential for political stability and economic growth in the context of rising nationalist pressures (Swynnerton, 1954). The plan's diagnosis of African agricultural problems emphasized the need for land tenure reform, technical assistance, and market access to enable African farmers to participate in commercial agriculture. Swynnerton argued that communal land tenure, lack of credit facilities, and restricted market access prevented African farmers from achieving their productive potential (Kitching, 1980).

Key components of the Swynnerton Plan included land consolidation and registration to create individual land titles, introduction of cash crops suitable for smallholder production, establishment of agricultural credit facilities, and development of cooperative marketing arrangements. These

reforms were designed to create a class of progressive African farmers who would support colonial rule while providing economic alternatives to political resistance (Elkins, 2005). Tea farming was identified as particularly suitable for African smallholder development due to its labor-intensive nature, suitability for small plots, and potential for providing regular income throughout the year. The plan proposed pilot tea schemes in selected areas where African farmers would receive technical assistance, input supply, and guaranteed markets through processing arrangements with existing estates (Sorensen, 1988).

The implementation of the Swynnerton Plan in Kipsigis land began with the establishment of settlement schemes at Kimulot, Itambe, and Chepalungu, designed to demonstrate improved agricultural practices and serve as models for broader adoption. These schemes provided selected African farmers with consolidated landholdings, technical training, and access to cash crops including tea (DC/KER/1/28/1954). Land consolidation in Kipsigis areas involved the survey and demarcation of individual holdings to replace communal tenure systems. This process was controversial as it conflicted with traditional land use practices and created new forms of inequality based on landholding size and location (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991).

The selection of African farmers for pilot tea schemes was based on criteria including demonstrated agricultural competence, willingness to adopt new practices, and political reliability. Colonial administrators sought to identify "progressive" farmers who would serve as examples for broader community adoption while supporting colonial policies (DC/KER/1/28/1954). Technical assistance for pilot tea schemes was provided through agricultural extension officers who taught tea cultivation techniques, supervised planting activities, and monitored compliance with quality standards. Extension services represented a significant expansion of colonial investment in African agricultural development compared to previous policies (Heyer, 1976). The Swynnerton

Plan's emphasis on individual land tenure and cash crop production represented a deliberate attempt to transform African agricultural systems from subsistence to commercial orientation. This transformation had profound implications for land use patterns, labor allocation, and social structures in affected communities (Berman, 1990).

The first pilot tea scheme in Kipsigis land was established at Kimulot in 1954 as part of the broader implementation of the Swynnerton Plan. The Kimulot settlement scheme was designed to demonstrate the viability of African tea production while serving as a model for broader smallholder development (KNA/DC/KER/1/30/1954).

The Kimulot scheme involved 106 African farmers who were allocated individual plots within a consolidated land area and provided with tea seedlings, technical training, and guaranteed markets through processing arrangements with nearby European estates. Each farmer was initially permitted to cultivate one-third of an acre of tea, totaling 35.5 acres of African tea production (East African Standard, 15/7/1960). Site selection for the Kimulot scheme was based on agro-ecological suitability for tea cultivation, proximity to existing processing facilities, and the presence of a settled African population willing to participate in the scheme. The area had previously been cultivated by a Kipsigis farmer named Arap Borowo, who was known for his resistance to colonial authority (OI/BMT/KON/08).

The provision of tea seedlings involved the establishment of nurseries managed by the Department of Agriculture, with seeds initially imported from Tanganyika to ensure genetic quality and disease resistance. Seedling production required careful attention to soil preparation, watering, and pest control to ensure high survival rates when transplanted to farmers' plots (KNA/DC/KER/1/25/1952). Technical training for pilot scheme participants was provided through demonstration plots, field days, and individual farm visits by agricultural extension officers. Training covered tea cultivation techniques including land preparation,

planting procedures, pruning methods, and quality standards for leaf plucking (DC/KER/1/30/1954).

Processing arrangements for African-grown tea involved agreements with European estates to purchase and process fresh leaf from smallholder plots. Brooke Bond and James Finlay initially processed African tea in their existing facilities while separate African processing capacity was planned for future development (KNA/DC/KER/1/30/1957). Quality control measures were implemented to ensure that African-grown tea met export standards, including supervision of plucking activities, inspection of fresh leaf deliveries, and testing of processed tea. These measures were necessary to maintain market acceptance and justify continued investment in smallholder tea development (East African Standard, 12/8/60).

Marketing arrangements guaranteed that African farmers would receive payment for their tea based on quality and quantity delivered to processing facilities. Payment systems were designed to provide incentives for quality production while ensuring fair compensation for farmers' labor and investment (KNA/NYANZA/2/9/1957). The success of the Kimulot pilot scheme encouraged expansion to additional areas within Kipsigis land and neighboring districts. By 1962, pilot tea schemes had been established in multiple locations with increasing numbers of African farmers participating in tea cultivation (DC/KER/1/32/1950). Challenges facing pilot tea schemes included initial farmer resistance due to concerns about land tenure changes, competition with food crop production for land and labor, and technical difficulties in maintaining quality standards. These challenges required ongoing adjustment of scheme design and implementation procedures (OI/BMT/KON/09).

African Farmer Responses and Adaptation (1954-1963):

African farmer responses to pilot tea schemes in Kipsigis land reflected complex considerations including economic opportunities, cultural concerns, and practical constraints related to land

use and labor allocation. Initial responses were mixed, with some farmers embracing tea cultivation while others remained skeptical about the long-term implications (Sorensen, 1988). Early adopters of tea cultivation were often farmers who had gained experience through estate employment and recognized the economic potential of tea production. These farmers understood tea cultivation requirements and possessed technical knowledge that facilitated successful adoption (OI/KER/BEL/01). As one early participant noted, "I had worked on the estate for many years and knew that tea could provide good money if properly managed" (OI/KER/BEL/03).

Farmer motivation for tea adoption included the potential for regular income throughout the year, unlike seasonal food crops that provided income only during harvest periods. Tea's perennial nature meant that farmers could earn money monthly through leaf sales, providing cash flow for household expenses, school fees, and agricultural inputs (OI/BMT/KON/13). Concerns about tea adoption centered on its long-term land use implications and potential conflicts with food production. Some farmers worried that dedicating land to tea would reduce their ability to grow food crops for household consumption, potentially creating food insecurity if tea prices fell or markets became unreliable (Chesang, 2009). The requirement for permanent land allocation to tea conflicted with traditional land use practices that emphasized flexibility and seasonal adjustments. Farmers accustomed to shifting cultivation and fallow periods found it difficult to commit specific plots to permanent tea cultivation (OI/BMT/STK/01).

Labor requirements for tea cultivation created additional concerns, as tea required year-round attention including regular weeding, pruning, and plucking activities that could conflict with seasonal food crop production. Farmers had to develop new labor allocation strategies that balanced tea requirements with subsistence farming needs (Kinyanjui, 1998). Gender roles in tea adoption reflected existing agricultural

divisions of labor while creating new opportunities and challenges for household members. Men typically made decisions about tea adoption and controlled income from tea sales, while women often provided much of the labor required for tea maintenance and harvesting (Von Bülow & Sørensen, 1993). Technical challenges facing African tea farmers included maintaining quality standards required for export markets, managing pest and disease problems, and applying fertilizers and other inputs according to recommended schedules. Extension services provided ongoing support, but farmers had to adapt recommendations to their specific conditions and resource constraints (OI/KER/BUR/14).

Financial constraints limited some farmers' ability to participate in tea schemes, as cultivation required initial investments in land preparation, seedlings, and maintenance activities before income generation began. The three-year period between planting and first harvest created cash flow challenges for resource-poor farmers (Omwoyo, 2000). Social dynamics within communities influenced tea adoption patterns, as successful early adopters served as examples for their neighbors while also creating new forms of economic differentiation. Tea income enabled some farmers to invest in additional land, livestock, or business activities, creating visible wealth differences within communities (OI/NAK/KUS/06). Adaptation strategies developed by African farmers included intercropping tea with food crops during the establishment period, using family labor to minimize cash costs, and gradually expanding tea acreage as experience and income increased. These strategies helped farmers manage risks while maximizing benefits from tea cultivation (Sorensen, 1988).

Institutional Development: Processing, Marketing and Cooperative Formation (1954-1963):

The development of processing and marketing arrangements for African-grown tea represented a

critical component of smallholder scheme success, as farmers needed reliable access to processing facilities and remunerative markets to justify their investment in tea cultivation. Initial arrangements involved processing African tea in existing European estate facilities while longer-term plans envisioned separate African processing capacity (Korir, 1976). Processing agreements between pilot schemes and European estates were negotiated through SCDA and the Tea Board of Kenya, with Brooke Bond and James Finlay initially agreeing to process African tea in their Kericho facilities. These arrangements provided African farmers with access to modern processing technology while utilizing existing capacity more efficiently (KNA/DC/KER/1/30/1957).

Quality standards for African tea were established to ensure compatibility with existing export markets and maintain the reputation of Kenya tea in international auctions. These standards covered leaf quality, processing procedures, and final product characteristics that had to meet buyer expectations in London and other major markets (Chesang, 2009). Payment systems for African tea were designed to provide fair compensation while maintaining incentives for quality production. Farmers were paid based on the weight and quality of fresh leaf delivered, with bonus payments for superior quality and penalties for substandard deliveries (KNA/NYANZA/2/9/1957).

Transportation arrangements were developed to collect fresh tea leaf from scattered smallholder plots and deliver it to processing facilities within the time limits required to maintain quality. This involved establishing collection centers, scheduling regular pickups, and organizing farmer groups to minimize transportation costs (DC/KER/1/30/1954). Marketing of processed African tea was initially handled through existing European estate marketing channels, including the Kenya Tea Growers Association and London auction systems. This provided African farmers with access to established markets while building experience in commercial tea marketing (Omwoyo, 2000).

Price determination for African tea followed market-based principles, with farmers receiving prices based on auction results minus processing and marketing costs. This system provided farmers with direct connection to market conditions while ensuring transparency in price determination (East African Standard, 15/7/1960). Plans for African-owned processing facilities were developed as smallholder production expanded, recognizing that dedicated processing capacity would be needed to handle growing volumes of African tea. The Commonwealth Development Corporation provided financial support for factory construction and equipment procurement (KNA/DC/KER/1/30/1950).

Factory ownership structures were designed to ensure African farmer control over processing operations while maintaining professional management and technical standards. Cooperative ownership models were promoted to enable farmers to capture value-added benefits from processing activities (Bates, 1989). Marketing cooperatives were established to handle the sale of processed tea and distribute proceeds to farmer members. These cooperatives provided farmers with collective bargaining power while building local capacity for commercial marketing activities (Heyer, 1976).

The development of smallholder tea farming required the creation of new institutional arrangements to support African farmers who lacked access to capital, technical knowledge, and marketing infrastructure possessed by European estates. The Special Crops Development Authority (SCDA), established under the Swynnerton Plan, played a central role in coordinating institutional development (Heyer, 1976). SCDA functions included coordinating smallholder development schemes, providing technical assistance and extension services, facilitating input supply and credit arrangements, and organizing marketing and processing services for African farmers. The authority represented a significant expansion of colonial investment in African agricultural development (Bates, 1989).

Cooperative formation was promoted as a mechanism for organizing smallholder farmers and providing services that individual farmers could not access independently. The Cooperative Development Department worked with SCDA to establish farmer cooperatives that could bulk produce for marketing, purchase inputs collectively, and provide credit facilities for members (KNA/DC/KER/1/30/1950). The first tea cooperatives in Kipsigis land were established in conjunction with pilot schemes, bringing together farmers from specific geographical areas to coordinate production and marketing activities. Cooperative membership was initially limited to participants in formal schemes but gradually expanded to include additional farmers as tea cultivation spread (DC/KER/1/30/1957).

Cooperative functions included collecting fresh tea leaf from member farms, transporting leaf to processing facilities, negotiating prices with processors, distributing payments to farmers, and providing technical advice and input supply services. These functions helped overcome logistical challenges facing individual smallholder farmers (Omwoyo, 2000). Leadership development within cooperatives was facilitated through training programs that taught cooperative principles, financial management, and agricultural techniques to elected farmer representatives. These programs aimed to build local capacity for managing cooperative activities and reducing dependence on external support (OI/KER/BUR/13).

Financial services provided through cooperatives included seasonal credit for agricultural inputs, savings facilities for farmer deposits, and payment systems for tea deliveries. These services addressed critical constraints facing smallholder farmers while building local financial capacity (Berman, 1990). Extension services were organized through cooperative structures, with agricultural officers working closely with cooperative leaders to disseminate technical information and monitor farming practices. This approach was more cost-effective than individual farm visits while ensuring consistent technical

support for cooperative members (Kitching, 1980). Quality control systems were implemented through cooperatives to ensure that member farmers met standards required for export markets. Cooperatives monitored plucking practices, inspected leaf deliveries, and provided feedback to farmers about quality improvements needed to maximize prices (East African Standard, 12/8/60). Challenges facing early cooperative development included limited management capacity among farmer leaders, competing interests between different farmer groups, and conflicts over benefit distribution. These challenges required ongoing support from government agencies and careful attention to cooperative governance structures (OI/BMT/KON/14).

Challenges and Constraints (1954-1963):

The development of smallholder tea farming in Kipsigis land faced numerous challenges and constraints that limited the pace and scope of expansion during the pilot phase. These challenges included technical difficulties, institutional weaknesses, market uncertainties, and social resistance that required ongoing attention and adaptation (Sorensen, 1988). Technical challenges included maintaining quality standards required for export markets, managing pest and disease problems, and ensuring adequate soil fertility for sustained tea production. Many African farmers lacked experience with intensive crop management and required extensive technical support to achieve satisfactory results (OI/KER/BEL/09).

Soil fertility management represented a particular challenge, as tea required regular fertilizer application to maintain productivity. Many farmers could not afford recommended fertilizer rates, leading to declining yields and quality problems that threatened the viability of smallholder tea production (Chesang, 2009). Pest and disease management required specialized knowledge and access to appropriate control measures that were often beyond the resources of individual smallholder farmers. Common problems included tea mosquito bug, thrips, and

various fungal diseases that could significantly reduce yields if not properly controlled (OI/KER/BUR/06).

Institutional constraints included limited extension service capacity, inadequate credit facilities, and weak cooperative management that hampered effective service delivery to smallholder farmers. The rapid expansion of schemes strained available technical support and created service gaps that affected farmer performance (Kitching, 1980). Credit constraints limited farmers' ability to purchase necessary inputs including fertilizers, pesticides, and tools required for effective tea cultivation. While cooperative credit was available in theory, implementation problems and limited funds meant that many farmers could not access adequate financing (Berman, 1990).

Market uncertainties created risks for farmers who were making long-term investments in tea cultivation without guaranteed future prices or market access. International tea market volatility meant that farmer incomes could fluctuate significantly, creating planning difficulties for household budgets (Omwoyo, 2000). Processing capacity constraints became apparent as smallholder production expanded beyond the capacity of existing estate facilities. Delays in establishing dedicated African processing facilities created bottlenecks that limited expansion and reduced farmer confidence in the long-term viability of smallholder tea production (OI/BMT/KON/15). Social resistance to tea adoption reflected concerns about changing land use patterns, labor requirements, and cultural implications of commercial agriculture. Some farmers preferred traditional subsistence strategies that provided greater flexibility and reduced market dependence (OI/BMT/STK/05).

Gender tensions emerged as tea cultivation altered traditional labor roles and income control patterns within households. Women's increased labor contributions to tea production were not always matched by greater control over tea income, creating conflicts over benefit distribution (Von Bülow & Sørensen, 1993). Land tenure issues

complicated tea development as the requirement for permanent land allocation conflicted with traditional flexibility in land use. Some farmers were reluctant to commit land to tea cultivation without secure tenure arrangements that protected their long-term interests (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991).

Discussion:

The historical emergence and institutionalization of smallholder tea farming in Kipsigis land between 1924 and 1963 reflects the complex dynamics of colonial agricultural transformation and the gradual inclusion of African farmers in cash crop production. This process demonstrates how colonial policies evolved from complete exclusion to controlled incorporation of African farmers, driven by changing political and economic circumstances.

The initial exclusion of African farmers from tea cultivation was consistent with broader colonial agricultural policies that prioritized European settler interests while restricting African participation in lucrative export crops (Rodney, 1972). The justifications for exclusion—technical complexity, quality control, and economies of scale—masked underlying concerns about protecting European investments and maintaining adequate labor supply for settler enterprises. However, African exclusion from tea cultivation did not prevent knowledge acquisition through labor migration and estate employment. The extensive participation of Kipsigis workers in tea estate labor created a substantial pool of technical knowledge that proved essential when opportunities for African tea cultivation finally emerged (Stichter, 1982). This demonstrates the importance of informal learning processes in agricultural development and the agency of African farmers in acquiring valuable skills despite colonial restrictions.

The Swynnerton Plan's inclusion of African farmers in tea cultivation represented a significant policy shift driven by recognition that African agricultural development was essential for political stability and economic growth (Swynnerton, 1954). However, this inclusion was

carefully controlled through institutional arrangements that maintained colonial oversight while limiting African autonomy in production and marketing decisions. The success of pilot tea schemes in Kipsigis land demonstrated the viability of smallholder tea production and challenged colonial assumptions about African agricultural capabilities. African farmers proved capable of maintaining quality standards and achieving satisfactory yields when provided with appropriate technical support and market access (Sorensen, 1988).

The institutional framework developed for smallholder tea farming, including cooperatives, extension services, and processing arrangements, created lasting structures that continued to shape the tea industry after independence. The transformation of SCDA into KTDA in 1964 maintained institutional continuity while transferring control to African management (Omwoyo, 2000). However, the colonial origins of these institutions also created lasting legacies including hierarchical management structures, top-down decision-making processes, and limited farmer participation in policy formulation. These characteristics reflected colonial priorities of maintaining control while providing minimal benefits to African farmers (Berman, 1990).

The gradual inclusion of African farmers in tea cultivation also had profound social and economic impacts on Kipsigis communities. Tea farming provided new income opportunities that enabled investments in education, healthcare, and consumer goods, but it also created new forms of inequality based on land access and technical knowledge (Kinyanjui, 1998). The transformation of land tenure systems from communal to individual ownership facilitated tea cultivation but also disrupted traditional resource management practices and created new vulnerabilities for land-poor households. The emphasis on permanent crop cultivation reduced flexibility in land use and increased households' exposure to market risks (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991).

Gender impacts of tea cultivation reflected broader patterns of agricultural commercialization that increased women's labor burdens while maintaining male control over income and decision-making. This pattern established gender inequalities that persisted into the post-independence period (Davison, 1988). The technical challenges facing early smallholder tea farmers, including soil fertility management, pest control, and quality maintenance, highlighted the importance of extension services and farmer education in agricultural development. The success of pilot schemes depended heavily on ongoing technical support that addressed farmers' knowledge gaps and resource constraints (Heyer, 1976).

Conclusion:

This study reveals that the historical emergence and institutionalization of smallholder tea farming in Kipsigis land between 1924 and 1963 represented a complex process of agricultural transformation driven by changing colonial policies, African agency, and evolving institutional arrangements. The initial exclusion of African farmers from tea cultivation reflected broader colonial priorities that favored European settler interests while restricting African participation in lucrative export crops.

However, African communities were not passive recipients of colonial policies but actively engaged with tea development opportunities through labor migration, knowledge acquisition, and strategic adaptation to changing circumstances. The extensive participation of Kipsigis workers in tea estate labor created essential technical knowledge that facilitated successful smallholder adoption when policy restrictions were finally relaxed. The Swynnerton Plan's inclusion of African farmers in tea cultivation marked a significant shift in colonial agricultural policy, but this inclusion was carefully controlled through institutional arrangements that maintained colonial oversight while limiting African autonomy. The success of pilot tea schemes demonstrated African agricultural capabilities and challenged colonial

assumptions about technical requirements for successful tea production.

The institutional framework developed for smallholder tea farming, including cooperatives, extension services, and processing arrangements, created lasting structures that shaped the post-independence tea industry. However, the colonial origins of these institutions also created hierarchical management practices and limited farmer participation that persisted beyond independence. The transformation had profound social and economic impacts on Kipsigis communities, providing new income opportunities while also creating inequalities and disrupting traditional resource management practices. The emphasis on individual land tenure and commercial agriculture facilitated tea adoption but reduced flexibility in land use and increased exposure to market risks.

Future research should examine how colonial institutional legacies continued to shape smallholder tea development in the post-independence period and explore alternative institutional arrangements that might better serve farmer interests. The lessons from Kipsigis tea development remain relevant for contemporary agricultural development efforts that seek to balance commercial production with smallholder welfare and sustainable resource management.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Oral Interview Respondents

S/No	Name	Interview date	Respondent's Code
Belgut Subcounty, Kericho (KER/BEL)			
1	Francis Arap Boen	11/07/2023	OI/KER/BEL/01
2	Sophia Lapchei	11/07/2023	OI/KER/BEL/03
3	Philip Arap Togom	19/07/2023	OI/KER/BEL/09
4	Dorcas Arusei	20/07/2023	OI/KER/BEL/11
Bureti Subcounty, Kericho (KER/BUR)			
5	Samuel Koske	06/09/2023	OI/KER/BUR/06
6	Kiptui Arap Tanui	20/09/2023	OI/KER/BUR/10
7	Jane Saina	20/09/2023	OI/KER/BUR/12
8	Norah Opanga (Field Services Coordinator, Litein Tea Factory)	26/09/2023	OI/KER/BUR/13
9	Caroline Chengetich (T.A/Agricultural Extension Officer, Litein Zone)	26/09/2023	OI/KER/BUR/14
Sotik Subcounty, Bomet (BMT/STK)			
10	Ambrose Koech	18/01/2024	OI/BMT/STK/01
11	Tapkili Chepkwony	19/01/2024	OI/BMT/STK/05
12	Arap Tobon	25/01/2025	OI/BMT/STK/09
Konoin Subcounty, Bomet (BMT/KON)			
13	Matayo Arap Chepkwony	23/01/2024	OI/BMT/KON/08
14	Josiah Talam	24/01/2024	OI/BMT/KON/09
15	Joseph Rotich	24/01/2024	OI/BMT/KON/11
16	Elizabeth Kerich	25/01/2024	OI/BMT/KON/13
17	Elkana Towett (Field Services Coordinator, Kapkoros Tea Factory)	30/01/2024	OI/BMT/KON/14
18	Robert Rotich (T.A/Agricultural Extension Officer, Kapkoros Zone)	30/01/2024	OI/BMT/KON/15
Kuresoi South Subcounty, Nakuru (NAK/KUS)			
19	Paulo Arap Simotwo	16/11/2023	OI/NAK/KUS/06

Appendix B: Timeline of Key Events (1924-1963)

Year	Event	Significance
1924	Commercial tea production begins	European estates established
1925	First tea factory opens in Kericho	Processing infrastructure developed
1930	KTGA formation	Industry organization established
1933	Kapkatet protests	African resistance to land alienation
1950	Tea Board of Kenya established	Industry regulation formalized
1954	Swynnerton Plan launched	Policy shift toward African inclusion
1954	Kimulot pilot scheme begins	First African tea cultivation
1957	First African tea harvest	Demonstration of viability
1960	Scheme expansion begins	Multiple pilot schemes established
1963	Independence achieved	Political control transferred

Appendix C: Key Colonial Officials and Their Roles

Name	Position	Period	Contribution
Major Evans Gorges	First DC Kericho	1902-1910	Established colonial administration
Mr. G.W.L. Cane	Tea pioneer	1903	Introduced first tea plants
Mr. Gambie	Provincial Officer	Agricultural 1950s	Organized tea block system
C.W. Barwell	District Officer	Agricultural 1949-1958	Supervised first African tea planting