The Abakuria in the Pre-Colonial Period

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Abstract
The paper has looked at the Abakuria, a Bantu-speaking people who live around Mara Hills and in the Serengeti plains in both Kenya and Tanzania. The paper has discussed their migration and settlement in the present homeland, political organization, social organization and material culture and their economic organization. They practiced a mixed economy, farming, and livestock keeping and craft and industry. They also traded with their neighbours. The study has established that the Abakuria have a very intricate culture. They still utilize their traditional material culture items. Some of those items, such as pots, baskets, Knives, Spears, and shields are seen in the photographs herein. It is remarkable to note that although much of the general physical features remain the same even today, it should be noted that when it comes to clothing the photographs’ show that the Abakuria had well-fitting and elaborate regalia for youth, women and men.

Key words: political, social, material, culture, economic

1.1 The Origin and settlement of the Abakuria in their present land
The Abakuria do not have any common historical origin; they appear to have sprung from all sorts of directions, although a number of them claim, to have originally come in the dim past from unidentified ‘Misri (Abuso, 1980). The Abakuria live to the south western part of Kenya. Chacha (1999) assert that the Abakuria who are classified as Bantu speakers are in a wider context not regarded as typical Bantu because of their overreliance on cattle especially in the last century. Some anthropologists have described them as “a cattle people at heart” with an obsession beyond cure”. An agricultural officer in the district wrote that “these natives as a whole are agricultural people with proclivities towards pastoral tendencies”(Kjerland, 1995).

Their traditions indicate that they are related with the Abologoli of the Abaluhya and the Abagusii. Like the Abaluya and the Abagusii, they trace their dispersal point to Mount Elgon region and maintain that their home of origin is Misri. Ochieng (1985) aver that, from linguistic studies, Kurialand was continuously occupied from the Late Stone Age. In the period up to A.D, 1500 the Bantu tended to occupy the areas bordering the lake, while the Southern Nilotes and the Southern Cushites lived on their eastern flank. The Bantu population subsequently expanded by absorbing their eastern neighbours, which led eventually to the
grafting of a southern Nilotic cyclical age set system. With the merging of Bantu and southern Nilotes into one society came the establishment of a social structure drawn from both backgrounds. Abuso (1980) adds that Abakuria people did not find their country devoid of people by the time they arrived there for the first time. Some of these early inhabitants were refugees fleeing for security from their original homelands. Others were adventurers looking for better places for settlements, while some were herdsmen seeking rich pastures for their flocks.

Abuso (1980) noted that various Abakuria clans by A.D. 1400 and 1500 had come from Misri and were living on the northern side of Lake Victoria. The period after A.D. 1500 Ochieng states that it saw the arrival in Kurialand of a number of clans, of which those of Abagusii origin were the most numerous and influential. Most of the Kuria clans of Abagusii origin arrived in Kurialand in the period between A.D. 1790 and 1850. They included the Sweta, Kiera, Baasi, Sigisa, and Osiango. Other arrivals after A.D 1600 included the Abairege who today claim that they came from Gwasi. To these must be added the Wategi, Suna, Ugu, and Wagire, who migrated to Kuria territory soon after they had been dispossessed by the Luo from the northern and western sections of South Nyanza. Thus by the beginning of the nineteenth century most of Bukuria was already effectively occupied by the various Abakuria clans.

2.1 The Abakuria Political Organization

The Abakuria were divided into small clans as the units of administration. These groups had very close ties. Usually they were groups which had travelled into Bukuria together. By the middle of the nineteenth century Bukuria was divided into several ‘provinces’. These were Bukuria regions based on their totems. There were as many provinces as there were totems in the region. They included the Elephant, Hippopotamus, Hyena, Zebra, Baboon and Leopard. All people of the same totem belonged to the same province. These totemic provinces later on became too large and were divided into two or more groups but still observing the same totem.

The administration in the provinces was very lose and flexible. Each province had its own government. There was no unifying government for all of the provinces. Bukuria was therefore a cultural federal without a federal government in existence. However, a number of important issues brought them together as a community for instance, deciding on the dates for the next initiations, the names for the new Age-Sets and effective defense against the Masaii. These were communal issues that needed the attention of the entire Bukuria community. Being a cultural federation the Abakuria would come together during several social attachments which were basic to the whole of the community. These included age-set and generation set systems, use of totems, and religious practices among others.

On political matters each provincial government had a ‘senate’ or Council of elders. Within each province was the chief religious leader and he was also a dreamer prophet. It was he who directed his people according to what he saw in his dreams. His dreams were usually regarded as true; they therefore had to be obeyed. The Abakuria have many instances in their traditions where they claim to have been directed into the particular routes which they later followed to their present country by their dreamer-prophets. Before they engaged in a battle with their neighbours the dreamer-prophet had to be consulted, and his verdict was final. Some traditions in the society hold that it was such a prophet who directed the ancestors of the Abakuria on the best route to follow from Misri. It is quite clear; however, that both the practice and office of the dreamer prophet are very old in the society all the people’s traditions are full of them. The office may be the oldest institutionalized political organism in Bukuria.
The administrative leader in each province had mystical powers and could not be challenged by the ordinary people of Bukuria. His powers were very much temporal and defined. He was appointed to his post by the people’s consensus (Although his children could at times inherit his office after him) and they could as well remove him if they were dissatisfied with his services. For his decisions he had to consult both the people through the dreamer prophet. He could not declare or stop war except by the consent of the prophet. If he disregarded the decisions of the prophet he automatically lost respect and following among his people, and that would cost him his job. But it appears that the two usually worked well together because the supremacy of the prophecy was universally held in Abakuria society.

The administrative leader was an outstanding warrior who climbed to his position of fame by having previously successfully led his people into a number of battles. In this he would have been in close contact with the dreamer prophet who both advised him and also ‘protected’ him from enemy attacks by the use of magical powers. After the battle of success close friendship would therefore emerge between the two personalities. Because no warriors within the locality would challenge this particular outstanding warrior, he automatically became the leader, of the clan or province. He owed his success and the final climb into leadership position to the dreamer – prophet, he hence became his superior. If the leader was powerful enough he would arrange for his sons to inherit his position on retirement, otherwise a completely new leader would arise after the retirement of the present one. His main function was to defend his people against external threats from whatever source, but for the day-to-day administration, the various religious leaders under the dreamer prophet were mostly consulted. This was because most of the rules and laws to be observed were religious ones needing religious solutions.

In matters relating to other clans the Council of elders was the normal channel of contacts. If, for example, a young man from one clan assaulted a woman from another clan, retribution for the offence would be sought through the offender’s Council of elders. In other words, both Councils of elders concerned would consult each other. The offender’s Council of elder would force him to pay for his offences. If no agreement was forthcoming, then the two clans would go war.

3.1 The Abakuria social organization and material culture

The Abakuria people sprang from too many directions to have a common historical origin. The culture of the present Abakuria therefore is an amalgam of many different cultures which originally have been opposed to each other in content and practice. The Abakuria have socially maintained an exciting culture but it is important to note that the culture of present day Abakuria community is an amalgamation of many different cultures which originally were in fact close to one another. Among the Abakuria are today found people who were originally from the Kalenjin, Maasai, Bantu and Luo speakers. These brought into Bukuria their peculiar cultures (Abuso 1980). This contributed to the vibrant social structure.

The Abakuria were organized into clans made up of people of related families. The Abakuria used totems to distinguish between the various clans and sub-tribes of the Abakuria. Apart from the Elephant totem all the other Abakuria totems were brought into Bukuria by the eighteenth century Bantu communities (Abuso 1980, Ochieng 1985). These Bantus invaded Bukuria with their language and their totems. A totem as a rule, is an animal whether edible, harmless, dangerous or feared and more rarely a plant or a natural phenomenon (Freud 1961). According to Freud, a totem is important in binding a community together as one people – a clan, and even bigger units such as a sub-tribe. A totem is important in that it explains in a mythical way the origins of the people observing it. The people who come to embrace a particular totem need not necessarily
come from one historical origin. All of Abakuria totems are wild animals including the Leopard, Zebra, Elephant, Baboon, Hippopotamus and Hyena. In Abakuria society a totem embraces not only one clan but a whole sub-tribe, or in other cases two or more sub-tribes together. All clans within that sub-tribe automatically belong to that totem. One totem’s system therefore automatically includes people who are of diverse historical origins who in the beginning might have had no connection with other clans within the same totemic system. Some of them could have changed from the totemic system to the other through the course of years as a result of mass and civil strife. The totems helped to cement all the hitherto heterogeneous sections of Bukuria communities into a unified group.

The Abakuria to a large extent have continued to utilize their traditional material culture items. Ear piercing was an important aspect of physical characteristic and social organization of the Abakuria. To become a Kuria proper, and in order to enter adulthood and for the purpose of beautification, all Abakuria had their upper ear-lobes pierced and lower ear-lobes prolonged and would hang usually to the shoulders. It is the main physical characteristic by which older Abakuria people male and female were distinguished by their immediate neighbours. Ear piercing began when the boys and girls were still uncircumcised teenagers. A special ear pierce carried out this work with a sharp knife, attached to a stick. In the end the lobes were let to hang low down to the shoulders. The longer they hanged the more dignified and prestigious the owner became among his people. The individuals whose ear-lobes hung longest were the most respected members within the Abakuria society, as demonstrated courage and patience to have reached that stage. See the picture 3.1 below.

![Figure 3.1: Ear piercing](image)

When the eldest boy had his ears pierced, local beer was brewed and a small celebration took place in the boy’s name. Piercing was the first step in the initiation of the young Abakuria into adult life. No Kuria man or woman could marry without piercing their ears. Until this time no Kuria man was allowed to become a member of the secret council if his ears were pierced properly. The pierced ears were a symbol of those who knew the how’s and why’s of Kuria traditions.

Every Abakuria boy or girl must pass through circumcision to be recognized as an adult. When one is circumcised he/she is placed into an age-set. In Kuria society one is recognized by the age set group. All people circumcised at the same time are given an age set. When a girl is married her age set group is changed to that of the husband if their age groups are different. Traditionally, circumcision was done at the age around 13 years, but this differed significantly from one clan to another. The Abairege had most of their men circumcised at 15–18 years and above. After circumcision, the initiates were taught the values and customs of their community. Circumcision admitted the young into the world of the adults and was a condition for entering marriage. The young uncircumcised girls wore typical ornaments and grass-woven
loops around their waists (figure 3.1) to fulfill three different functions: - beautification, items of dress and thus covering nudity and identification of gender.

Figure 3.2: Girls with typical ornaments of uncircumcised girls

The uncircumcised boys were strong enough to kill wild animals and to take part in fighting with enemy tribes. They were eager to show their strength and thus prove that they were ready for circumcision. However, they would still be termed children and their dress clearly distinguished them from circumcised boys Grass –woven loops were important in the boys dress. Large numbers of them were worn around the neck, a cross the upper part of the breast and around the waist covered their private parts. A cloak made of skins was also part of the uncircumcised boys’ dress.

Youth during the healing were not allowed to wash throughout the healing period and they smeared themselves with clay for identification. Various headgears, jewelers and dresses seen in the pictures 3.2 and 3.3 all underline the importance of this rite of passage.

Figure 3.3: Youth after circumcision
A young Kuria man was a full warrior from the time he was completely healed and until a new circumcision set he was strong enough to protect the community. Each Kuria sub-tribe performed circumcision separately and the sequence of the circumcision-sets differed.

The Abakuria have generation set system. The earliest Abakuria age-set known, the Ntome, was initiated for the first time at chepalungu region between about 1578 and 1690. The Abakuria age sets helped them in determining their chronology, they were linear and occurred at specific intervals, they were very useful as a time scale in the people’s history, moreover, the sets were usually named after some important local events which took place during the time the sets were being initiated. Thus they were very useful reminders of what took place at particular times, making the peoples history very well time spread. As a social system, however, age sets had limited use in Abakuria society beyond the fact of determine who among the people were initiated together. Age sets determined the particular ages of different people in the society.

Importantly age sets acted as military units. They helped to organize efficient military training within the community. In Bukuria there were no special military classes. When war broke out all the able bodied men go out and defend their country. In this category were Adults and junior Elders. Thus, all the age-sets would be considered as potential warriors at any one time.
The generation-sets on the other hand had a much wider social application in Bukuria society. Some of the Abakuria generation families were the Abamaina, Abasai and Abachama. The system helped to determine the social status of each member of the society. The senior members of the oldest generation would be consulted in important matters of the whole community. In the In Abakuria society every person knew where he stood in the social hierarchy. This helped everybody in the society to be aware of how he should behave in the society. The first thing they knew was that each member of one family would freely associate with the other members of his or the other family members, provided those also belonged to his social group in the other family or to the corresponding group in the other family. Secondly, a member of a social group, say the adults, could only marry within his own social group or within the next alternating group, that is, Senior Elders in this case. He could not marry the next younger group because those were his ‘children’ and he could not marry from the next senior group because those were his ‘parents.’ The generation-set thus controlled practically every aspect of Abakuria life-conduct and behavior in the society. This would be seen in in other important social instances such as gatherings in the beer party, feasting during a wedding party, appearance at dancing and other entertainment parties. In all these cases the children would stay only within their own group or they would associate freely with their ‘grandparents’ but they would not mix together in any social gathering with their ‘parents’-that is those in their own parents’ social groups (including their own parents).

The Abakuria believed in the existence of a supernatural power, a god that controlled their destiny. They believed that their god controlled the universe and therefore had to be treated with utmost care and respect so as to avoid his wrath. Their supreme God was known by various names such as Rioba, Nokwe, Gekoni, Getemi, Mosacha–Obairo, Keng’ori and Nyambhanga. This one God was omnipotent and benevolent. He was represented by the sun, though he wasn’t the sun. The sun god was the author of all good things and it was his duty to bless his people with fertility in men and animals, rain for crops and livestock and many other things such as good health and prosperity. He would never hurt his people in any way. Below him were his two important agents, who were at times worshipped by the people as intermediaries between them and the sun god. These were ancestral spirits whose worship was general among the Abakuria. Any minor request which any Omukuria had was done through the worship of ancestral spirits. Sacrifices were therefore also offered through the ancestral worship.

In Bukuria taboos and superstitions had very important places; there were certain practices, or utterances which were prohibited to the whole people. Each Omukuria had to observe these taboos and superstitions in accordance with the norms of the society. The observance of these was the basic requirement or law for any Omukuria. Since all these taboos and superstitions affected the whole of Abakuria society it meant that right from the origin of the society there were certain religious laws which had to be obeyed by all the people of the society. It was from these early religious laws that other tribal laws and sanctions later developed. Most of these were automatic and needed courts for their observance or enforcements. If one of them was broken, misfortune would automatically follow the offender and his family. People therefore obeyed them to the latter. The most important human figure in all of these religious practices was the high priest. In each province there was one high priest with a number of priests under him. They accepted the sacrifices form the people and advised them. They acknowledged and honoured their ancestral spirits by pouring libations for them, usually at the end of every meal. This was done to quench their thirst, relieve their hunger and to appease them. Diviners, rainmakers and medicine people were also present in the Abakuria community. These people were known to posses’ special powers or charms. Medicine people were trained through
apprenticeship by close relatives. Their skills can be compared to those in today’s traditional or herbal medicine.

Labour was organized according to gender and age. The tasks for women were many and varied. They gave birth to the new generation of Abakuria, cared for the family in all instances, farmed and made tools or equipment for the household. However, entertainment and joy balanced hard work. Their thrills of joy were heard at birth, at weddings or while watching or participating in dancing especially after work (Kenya Archaeological and Ethnographic Research Agency (KAERA) 1988:56).

Men were decision makers and responsible for the well-being of the community (both ritually and socially). They built houses and cattle enclosures, herded cattle, cleared land for agriculture, hunted, farmed and instructed the young warriors on how to defend the community. After work they rested as they drank their local brew, sniffed bhang and smoked pipe among a host of other forms of rests (KAERA, 1988:57).

The uncircumcised boys and girls had varied duties to perform. They herded cattle, cared for small brothers and sisters, learnt to hunt, to cook and to behave according to the norms of the community. In the early morning and late afternoon young boys sat at the cow–dung hill listening to their grandfathers, while the girls sat next to the elderly women as they cooked or made baskets at the time of rest. The main duty of the warriors was to protect the community from enemies.

Interrmarriage occurred between them and the Bantu communities they interacted with. The Abakuria also intermarried with the Luo. At first they did not seem to have favoured the idea of intermarrying with a non-uncircumcised community like the Luo. This was in itself a barrier between the two communities for a long time. However, familiarization later took place between the two communities through trade then intermarriage thereafter followed.

The Abakuria still maintained their traditional dances. They celebrated a number of occasions in song and dance (Weiss 1910). The mood and style of their songs and dances varied depending on the occasion. Such occasions included ear piercing, childbirth, harvest, circumcision and marriage. One would therefore conclude that the life of the Abakuria community was not only diverse, but also rich in social activities. There were various types of dances.. The girls would prepare themselves for a dance by decorating themselves well. Some would wear long skins while some would wear a shorter skirt, mainly covering their behinds.

4.1 Pre-Colonial Abakuria Economy
4.1.1 Land Tenure and Crop Production
The Abakuria had plenty of land and for a long time they practiced mixed economy, crop growing and livestock keeping (KAERA, 1988:3, Onyango, 2002:5). They were agriculturally influenced by the invaders especially the Abagusii clan who came in large numbers. The many other communities who thronged Kuria land accounted for the increased population resulting into enlarged and improved land use. Their crop fields were found as far as one or two hour’s walk away from the fortified village, barricaded with stone wall on very fertile places. Fields were cultivated individually by the family members of each house and between the fields’ rows of millet were planted as boundaries.
The land under cultivation was always in one block, chiefly as security precaution. Each family occupied its own particular piece of land and normally tried to make this as extensive as the elders of the sub-clan would allow. The Abakuria were divided into a number of groups. Each group was in turn divided into about five villages each of which was inhabited by one clan. These clans were divided into a number of sub-clans each one of which inhabited a defined area. The boundaries of such areas were usually streams, rocks, valley bottoms or hills. Immediately outside this barriers lay the grazing land and outside this the arable land (KNA/ NZA/PC/4/2/1/7/ Agricultural Development in South Kavirondo 1960-1962:54).

Allocation of land was in the hands of the clans, through their representatives, the clan and sub-clan heads. Uncultivated land was abundant and the occupier obtained security of tenure. He could not be deprived of his plot or part of it even if he did not cultivate it. The land could be inherited but the occupier had no right to sell it or give it to someone else. He could only lose his land when he left it reverted to the clan (KNA/ NZA/PC/4/2/1/7/ Agricultural Development in South Kavirondo 1960-1962:54).

Family land was owned jointly but the use of or benefit from or access to land was fragmented within the family, firstly to different sections in the family and secondly to grown-up male individuals in the family. The individual was entitled to access to land by reason of birth into a land-controlling group. However, an individual could also acquire personal land by his own efforts by clearing part of virgin land in his area, or accepting a gift or by inheritance. The individual could not transfer or dispose of family land for self-acquired property. A long side family land there was also communal land over which grazing, water, and firewood collection rights were shared equally. It thus should be clear that during pre-colonial times in Bukuria land tenure was best described as communal-based. This was because land allocation was controlled by a land authority be it clan, lineage or family. Secondly, individuals had a community share in or the right to benefit from land resources. Members’ entitled to land was based on the fact that the individual belonged to a particular group. Finally, some common rights of individuals belonging to the group existed such as the right to share in hunting among others (KNA/ NZA/PC/4/2/1/7/ Agricultural Development in South Kavirondo 1960-1962:54).

4.1.2 Crop Production
For many years the Kenyan communities adjusted themselves to their ecological environment (Sheriff, 1985:1) consequently, the Abakuria community adapted themselves to agricultural economy. On the hilly section of the country the people were mainly agriculturalists. During the pre-colonial period the Abakuria mostly lived on the hilly areas for security purposes. Cattle raids as well as inter-clan clashes were common so the hilly sides were preferred. The environmental factors contributed to the success of agriculture in these areas. The environmental factors regulated the sequence of the events and innovative technical development leading to the advancement in agricultural production. The environment provided the drive to modification of agriculture in the pre-colonial period. The crops which were cultivated first by the people were finger millet, sweet potatoes, sorghum and a few species of vegetables e.g. cow peace. The rest of the vegetables grew wildly.

Millet and finger millet thrived well because they were suitable to the local physical conditions especially the inland modified tropical equatorial type of climate experienced in the area. It is modified by the effects of relief which is 1350-1800m above sea level and the influence of Lake Victoria. Finger millet was the staple food. Other than it being mixed with sorghum to make ugali, it was also used to make porridge, it
provided a source of brewing-yeast for traditional drink and traditional brew. The brew was used especially during special occasions like naming, wedding, and circumcision among others.

Fertile soils especially in the hilly areas of Ntimaru and Kegonga physically influenced their agricultural economy and accorded the machinery that set agricultural economy into a thriving unit leading to increased production. The crops growth was also well regulated by the Kuria’s bimodal rainfall with peaks in April and November. Annual rainfall ranges between 1500mm and 1600mm. Kegonga and Ntimaru Divisions receive more rainfall than the other parts of the Bukuria, while Mabera receives the lowest rainfall. Dry seasons are between December and February.

In time just like in other parts of Kenya, other crops like bananas and beans were adopted in Bukuria from India and South–East Asia. Around the fifteenth century the Portuguese further introduced maize, groundnuts, sweet potatoes and cassava along the coast. These crops later found their way into Kuria. Ochieng (1985:37) explains that very little is known about how the above crops spread; the route may have varied with the type of crop and its habitat requirements. Cassava, Ochieng explains was first thought to have reached the lake area of East Africa from the west, while it is possible that one route by which maize arrived in the same area was from the east, through Ethiopia. Unlike finger millet and millet, Maize, though later became popular but could not do well in areas with poor soils and little rainfall. There were two types of maize, the yellow maize and the black and white type. With the introduction of new and varied crops in Bukuria diversification of agriculture became paramount. Land was commonly prepared during the periods of dry spell, December to February. Clearance of virgin land was especially done by men using a metal which was flattened by heating or hitting with a big stone and where the bush was so thick they used fire to clear it. The ash produced during bush burning naturally added to the fertility of the soil and no other form of manure was used. It was the women who mainly worked on the crops in Bukuria. They were the ones who had the patience and gave the careful attention needed for the job and so they had the authority and a say in the produce (Abuso 1980:32).

Intercropping was a common phenomenon. They mostly broadcasted the finger millet seeds in a single file and Sorghum was planted around the farm at the sides to act as a fence. Planting was only done once in a year. Simple tools for cultivation especially sharp pointed sticks and cows’ ribs were used for weeding. Due to dynamism and innovativeness blacksmiths later emerged. They made simple sharp-pointed iron hoes that were used. The new tools though simple but led to large tracts of land being cleared and cultivated for the growing of crops. This eventually led to increased production. The weeding of finger millet required a sharp-pointed hoe, as finger millet was planted closely packed together. For harvesting of finger millet and sorghum they used clay baked sickles. The harvests were carried home in palm made baskets and the grains were stored in the traditional granaries from where they were used possibly until the next season.

When the work became overwhelming for the women they solicited the assistance of other women in what was termed communal labour and vice versa. Communal work succeeded well in polygamous families. Members of a polygamous family teamed up in instances where farm work became overwhelming. But each woman in a polygamous family owned her own property in terms of land and cattle. Most of what was grown was for home consumption but the little surplus was exchanged with other products and if not with certain items. The exchange was within the community.
Shifting cultivation was practiced and whenever a given piece of land lost its fertility the Abakuria moved to virgin areas to allow reversion of fertility. Cultivation was done on a common ground for security purposes. These could be against wild animals among other factors. At times the age-groups combined to form larger groups resulting into larger pieces of land being cultivated. Other than land clearance, men went hunting, fencing, and raiding of cattle from their neighbours or looked after cattle. Men also had the responsibility of preventing burrowing and grazing animals from destroying crops by using trenches pit traps, nooses, spears, arrows and dogs (Abuso 1980:33).

4.1.3 Livestock Keeping
Cattle’s keeping was the work of men. Abakuria love for cattle was very much like that of the Maasai; their southern neighbours. Other than cattle, sheep, donkeys and goats were also kept. The quality was maintained by treating livestock with traditional herbs and giving salt lick for high milk production. The Abakuria herdsmen used to roam the expanse of countrysides with their cattle and goats looking for good pasture and salt-licks for their much loved animals. They went as far as Masailand and Migori for pasture especially during the dry spell. Rain makers’ assistance was solicited to rescue the community during such times. Because of frequent cattle raids many herdsmen armed with bows and poisoned arrows went out together with their livestock for sufficient protection against cattle raiders in the neighbourhood.

Cattle’s keeping was a full time job and was very taxing. It needed the attention of the men and a number of them had to be fully armed throughout the day and night against external enemies. It was a co-operate job which could never be successfully done alone (Abuso 1980:33). Abakuria valued cattle highly for their blood and milk which played a part in their diet. In instances where the farm produce was hardly enough due to crop failure, they depended on blood and milk. The animals also provided meat, hides and skin for clothing and bedding, horns for communication, and hooves for glue and as drinking vessels. Cattle also served as a source of wealth. Ghee was also an important product. It was used for cooking a special porridge for the suckling mothers, for cooking vegetables, and as an ointment for the pierced ear lobes. Cattle were acquired in a number of ways; those who had daughters acquired cattle through payment of dowry which was between 10 and 12 cows.. Cattle were also acquired through trade which initially involved exchange of commodities. Inheritance and stock-lending.

4.1.4 Hunting and Gathering
Ochieng (1985:37) asserts that hunting both as a food source and as a protection for cultivated crops. He explains that oral accounts, especially those of the Luo, Abagusii and Abakuria, frequently explain the movement of people by stating that they were hunting an animal which led them to a desirable location where they finally settled. The Abakuria men hunted various types of animals for their flesh to supplement the vegetable diet provided by the agricultural activities of the women. The animals also were hunted for their hides and skin. The leopard and the lion’s skins were valued by the political leaders. Women gathered wild fruits, roots, leaves and vegetables. Insects such as white ants and locusts were also gathered.

The bushy nature of Kurialand facilitated hunting and gathering. The upper reaches of the Mara were well wooded, and the plains running between the foothills of the southern escarpment were dotted with thorn trees which also abound in the country lying south of the Mara. The big game was more plentiful on the southern section of Bukuria than on the northern side.
Both the Serengeti Game Reserve and the Masai Mara Game Reserve in Tanzania and Kenya respectively, border Bukuria. The large game found in the region included zebra, rhinoceros, and impala. To the west of the Mara in Kenya were also found wildebeest, lion, leopard, hyena, wildcat, and ostrich. Hunting went along with herding cattle. While a section of them were watching over the animals, the rest went hunting from forests. But should cattle raiders appear, all those hunting were immediately summoned to the defense of their livestock (Abuso 1980:33).

4.1.5 Craft and Industry
The women moulded pots (figure 4.0) plates and dishes. These items were fired to improve on their quality. The pots were used for storing of grains, drinking water, keeping milk, porridge, carrying water from the river, cooking, and for the brewing of the local bear.

![Figure 4.1: Women moulding a pot](image1.png)  ![Figure 4.2: A finished product](image2.png)

(Weiss, 1904)

Men were not left out of this; they moulded smoking pipes using the same raw material. Weaving was a popular activity among the Abakuria. The women used palm leaves to weave baskets for storage and for carrying of grains. Millet stock peals were used to weave a range of containers (figure 4.2). Some of which were for storing porridge, keeping ugali and for general use. Traditional granaries for storage of grains and drinking straws were woven by men.

![Figure 4.3](image3.png)  ![Figure 4.4](image4.png)

(Weiss 1904)

The calabash was used as a drinking vessel and for fetching water. The bigger gourds were simply prepared and used for churning and storing of milk. The extremely bigger gourds were for the storage of grains-figures 4.4 and 4.5.
Men made musical instruments such as drums, harps a single stringed musical instrument (figure 4.6) which produce sound through vibration of a bowed string. The instrument is played during such occasions as wedding ceremonies and other forms of entertainment.

Men also worked on wood to produce cups, stools, pestle and mortar, hooves to produce paint and gum, horns to produce gum, skin to produce clothes and beddings. Spears, sword-like knives, arrows, bows, and shields were all important weapons made by the Abakuria men. They made both long and short spears. Simple iron hoes were also made. The blacksmiths especially the Abaturia sub-clan of the Abagumbe clan had the iron smelting skill and so they made the iron tools and weapons. The ore was obtained locally from the farms. Shields were made from buffalo’s skin and their designs were in ochre-red, soot-black and white from burnt bones. The shields were differently decorated. The iron tools made promoted agriculture as large fields were cultivated and production increased resulting into surplus for exchange.

### 4.1.6 Trade

Trading, the exchange of goods for mutual benefit was a universal human practice found among the simplest societies. Although simple communities were commonly thought to have self-sufficient subsistence economies, trade was frequently reported even among those who lived by hunting and gathering (Ochieng, 1985:38). From the historical traditions collected from western Kenya, where the Abakuria also form part, it is evident that there were wide spread trading connections in the region. On the whole there was local trade between neighbouring villages or people who lived under different ecological conditions and so specialized in certain forms of production, the agriculturalists and the pastoralists.
Nature prompted the Abakuria people to trade with their neighbours to acquire what they could not produce and yet they needed. Market centres where exchange was conducted locally developed along the routes and where simple industrial activities were carried out. The Abakuria exchanged various articles with one another for example; they exchanged livestock for grain, animals for weapons or ornaments, and so on. There was an important trade with the people who were living near Lake Victoria- the Luo and the Bantu. They took to them various items such as spears, wild animals’ skin, large bird feathers and grains (Abuso, 1980:34). The exchange between the Luo and the Abakuria was mainly on food stuffs. It therefore became not only possible but necessary for the Abakuria to participate in the trade.

At first, the interaction between the Abakuria and the Luo was centered mainly on trade. This was first indirectly conducted with the Suna Bantu groups such as the Abasimbete, Abasweta, Abanchari, and Wiga among others acting as middlemen. In the trade the Abakuria sold iron weapons and ornaments which the Abaturi had made from the iron ores mined locally from Taogota (Lolgorien) near Gutura. The Abaturi (Waturi) were blacksmiths. The Abaturi who are today a sub-clan in Bugembe appears to be same people as the walowa of Yimbo (Ochieng 1968). They continued with their trade in blacksmith wares. Their wares together with other items such as large bird feathers, large game skins, elephant tusks, lion claws, leopard skins and claws, all of which were needed both by the Luo and Bantu of Suna, formed the main commodities of trade from Bukuria to Lake Victoria. These items were in great demand not only among the Luo of South Nyanza but even in Siaya and Uganda.

This trade connected Maasailand as well simply because of the items such as lion skins and claws and red ochre for facial painting during military campaigns. It was the Maasai who knew how to trap and kill a lion easily. They would therefore sell these products from the lion to the Abakuria people in exchange for arrow heads. The Abakuria traders in turn took these to the Bantu of Suna. The Suna handed them over to the Luo in exchange for bananas, millet and salt among other commodities which the Luo had received from across the lake and Uganda.

The other important trade commodity was fish. The northern Abakuria groups such as the Abagumbe, Abakira, Abakanye, and Abanchari, originally bought their supply of fish from the Suna-Bantu middlemen not directly from the Luo. In exchange they gave their usual wares to the lakeshore Bantu groups, who in turn gave them to the Luo. Later, as the Abakuria communities became familiar with the Luo, they directly sold their wares to them (Abuso 1980:34).

As a result of this lake-shore trade, the Abakuria society was divided into two cultural regions. The first group was the southern lot who were more connected with the Maasai, Zanaki, and Nguruimi people. The second section was those who were drawn northwards towards Lake Victoria and were thus culturally more connected with the Luo. This trade led to peaceful co-existence and intermarriage between them. Magaga (1991) asserts that trade enhanced marriage between neighbouring communities. That marriage ensured the reproduction and the balancing of the diminishing populations and also created mutual benefits to those involved.
References


Kenya Archaeological and Ethnographic Research Agency (KAERA) 1988


