THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FAMINE: ECOLOGY AND HISTORY IN
MACHAKOS DISTRICT DURING THE COLONIAL ERA

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FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

By:

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FEBRUARY, 1992
DECLARATION

THIS THESIS IS MY ORIGINAL WORK AND HAS NOT BEEN PRESENTED FOR A DEGREE IN ANY OTHER UNIVERSITY.

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THIS THESIS HAS BEEN SUBMITTED FOR EXAMINATION WITH MY APPROVAL AS UNIVERSITY SUPERVISOR.

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<td>ADC</td>
<td>African District Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIM</td>
<td>Africa Inland Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALDEV</td>
<td>African Land Development Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASLUB</td>
<td>African Settlement and Land Utilization Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>Colonial Development (Fund)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD &amp; W</td>
<td>Colonial Development and Welfare (Fund)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Central Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAO</td>
<td>District Agricultural Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARA</td>
<td>Development and Reconstruction Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>DC</td>
<td>District Commissioner</td>
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<tr>
<td>DO</td>
<td>District Officer</td>
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<td>EALB</td>
<td>East African Literature Bureau</td>
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<td>EAP</td>
<td>East Africa Protectorate</td>
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<td>EAPH</td>
<td>East African Publishing House</td>
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<td>EST</td>
<td>Eastern (Province)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HMSO</td>
<td>His Majesty's Stationary Office</td>
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<td>IBEA</td>
<td>Imperial British East Africa Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>KAR</td>
<td>King's African Rifles</td>
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<tr>
<td>KBU</td>
<td>Kiambu (District)</td>
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ABSTRACT

The study documents food problems in colonial Machakos in the context of the changes wrought by the development of capitalism in the area. The paradigm of articulation of modes of production is therefore applied to the analysis of food crises in their particular historical context. Each food crisis is examined in the light of social, political, economic and ecological changes emanating from the interaction between aspects of pre-capitalist Kamba system of production and the capitalist mode of production.

The process of articulation between the two modes of production was initiated by merchant capitalism in the late nineteenth century and intensified by colonial capitalism in the twentieth century. The basic concern of this study is the role of the colonial state (and therefore colonial capitalism) in the transformation of the Kamba society, and how that transformation featured in food problems. For example, land alienation caused overcrowding and overstocking which engendered over-cultivation, over-grazing and soil erosion. Land degradation was further aggravated by monetisation of the economy, which bred commodity production and wage labour. This socio-ecological transformation was not accompanied by technological advancement and therefore the society's margin of security against climatic variability was progressively reduced.
Thus, after the ecological disasters of the late 1890s, the Kamba economy recovered to the extent that the society was able to resist large scale 'proletarianisation' until about 1930. However, the impact of land alienation, drought and locust invasion in 1928-29, and the Great Depression (1929-35) greatly eroded the economy's dynamism. The 1930s therefore witnessed increased proletarianisation and ecological degradation, processes which culminated in severe food shortages during the Second World War. Despite its pervasion, the post-war development programme did not provide immediate solutions to environmental degradation and food crises. On the whole, the study asserts that climatic factors notwithstanding, the colonial state's policies on land, labour, taxation, public expenditure etc intensified the frequency and intensity of food crises in Machakos District.
CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM

For most of the colonial period, Machakos District was the scene of a complex agrarian problem. The problem, which came to be known as 'The Machakos Problem' in colonial circles, basically involved the inability of an increasing population to produce enough food from degrading land resources. As a result, food crises increased in frequency and intensity over the years, a phenomenon which not only disturbed the colonial administration but also affected the people of Machakos in various ways.

Like in most of pre-colonial Africa, food problems were not unknown in pre-colonial Machakos. However, colonialism changed their causes and nature. Through demands for land, labour, taxes, etc, colonialism set in motion processes which made the Akamba of Machakos District more and more vulnerable to environmental perturbations such as drought and locust invasions. It is in this perspective of changing circumstances that this study analyses the historical context of specific food crises in Machakos District during the colonial era.
Food crises in colonial Africa were not entirely due to colonialism. However, colonialism "drastically altered the social and ecological organisation of agriculture", a factor which undermined collective responses to food shortages and set the stage for the growth and recurrence of famine (Zeleza, 1989a: 58). Like pre-industrial societies elsewhere in the world, pre-colonial African societies were prone to such extremes in nature as prolonged droughts. Nevertheless, pre-colonial African societies had well-developed mechanisms and strategies for minimising the occurrence of food crises. For example, food production systems were chosen on the basis of a clear perception of the environment. Moreover, societies which inhabited marginal areas developed food trade relations with their more fortunate neighbours.

Even in societies where a ruling aristocracy extracted surplus from the rest of the society, there existed complex relationships and institutions which ensured redistribution of food-stuffs during shortages. For instance, the Tswana had 'royal' farms (Bhila, 1984) while the Hausa had 'royal' granaries (Shenton and Watts, 1979). In short, different societies had different methods of coping with the risks inherent
in their particular production system. But colonialism interfered with most of these features without introducing viable risk-coping mechanisms.

To understand food problems in a particular society during the colonial era, it is necessary to examine the impact of colonialism on that society. It is necessary, for example, to investigate the effects of commodity production on the society's social structure and how changes in the social structure were manifested in food shortages. Similarly, the impact of labour migration on food production needs to be looked into. For example, one observer said the following about the situation in Kenya in the 1920s:

Nowadays it is only in the years of special plenty that there is no food shortages before harvest. And it is absurd to pretend that the absence in agricultural tribes, of more than half the able-bodied male population is not the chief cause of this chronic scarcity (Leys, 1973:304).

Nor was the impact of colonialism confined to social transformation; it affected land-use as well. In Machakos District, for example, the effects of ecological degradation on food production were
underscored by the Agricultural Officer in 1944 when he said:

The lack of fertility of the soil has been the main cause of the succession of crop failures. Even in a year of average rainfall severe famine conditions have prevailed

(KNA/DC/MKS 8/4: 254)

In sum, the gradual incorporation of Kenyan societies into the capitalist system through the colonial state progressively led to a crisis in pre-existing systems of production and distribution. This resulted in what Zeleza (1989a: 35) calls "the spasmodic development and underdevelopment of Kenya's peasantiies". The impact of this transformation made a senior Agricultural Officer in Central Province in 1944 to lament:

Of old there was an agricultural system of a kind, a system that was in large measure effective in a somewhat primitive way. That system has collapsed, as it was bound to do under the strain of a new economy

(KNA/DC/MKS 2/18/1:154).

1:1 Political Geography of Machakos District

Machakos District (Map 1) is in Eastern Province, Kenya. The district has an area of
Map I: MACHAKOS DISTRICT

Inset: Location of the district in Kenya.
approximately 14,250 km² and extends some 275 km from north-west to south-east. It tapers from 125 km wide in the north to less than 20 km wide in the south. The district's neighbours are Kajiado District to the west, Taita-Taveta District to the south-east, Kitui District to the east, Embu to the north-east, Murang'a to the north and Kiambu District and Nairobi Province to the north-west (Kenya, 1989 : 1).

From 1895 to 1902 the Machakos area together with Kitui formed Athi District in the Ukamba Province (Map 2) of the East Africa Protectorate¹. In 1902 Athi District was split into two and the Machakos area came to be known as Ulu District. It existed under that name until it was renamed Machakos District in 1920. Then in 1933 Ukamba Province amalgamated with Kikuyu Province to form Central Province (Munro, 1975 : 54 n.3). Thenceforth, the district was part of Central Province until 1953 when, probably as a precaution against the spread of Mau Mau activities into Ukambani, Machakos

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¹ Initially, Ukamba Province was made up of three districts: Athi, which comprised Machakos and the surrounding Kamba territory; Kenia, which included lands inhabited by the Kikuyu and the Maasai; and Teita, which consisted of the Taita and Taveta people.
Map 2: UKAMBA PROVINCE, 1896

Source: KNA/PC/Coast 1/1/31:174.
and Kitui districts were severed from Central Province and joined to Kajiado and Narok districts in a new Southern Province. On the recommendation of the Regional Boundaries Commission of 1962, Machakos District became part of Eastern Province at independence in 1963 (Ojaný and Ogendo, 1972: 14-16). The other districts of Eastern Province are Kitui, Embu, Meru, Isiolo and Marsabit.

When the boundary of what came to be Machakos District was defined in 1911, it began at the railway bridge over Athi River (in the present-day Athi River township) and followed the course of the Athi to its junction with Tsavo River; from there it ran in a north-easterly direction through the Chyulu Hills to Emali railway station, whence it followed the railway line to Athi River. Except in the southern parts of the district where the boundary shifted several times during the colonial era, the rest of the boundary corresponded roughly to what is shown in Map 3.

From about 1908 the district comprised of three major land units under one administration. Two of these were the so-called Kamba Land Units or Reserves:
Map 3: MACHAKOS DISTRICT: LAND ALIENATION

Source: KNA/DC/MKS 8/3:5.
Kikumbulyu in the southern part of the district and Ulu (Machakos) in the northern part. The third land unit comprised European farms in the west and north-west of Ulu Reserve and south of Kikumbulyu Reserve (Map 3).

Unlike Kikumbulyu Reserve which was redefined several times, Ulu Reserve remained relatively stable. In 1934, 300 square miles of Yatta Plateau were added to Machakos Reserve as Class B1 land following a recommendation of the Kenya Land Commission (1933). However, this land, which is commonly referred to as Machakos Yatta, remained a relief grazing area until the late 1940s when settlement began on experimental basis. Similarly, North Yatta (Map 1), also called Kikuyu Yatta, was given to the Kikuyu by the Land Commission, but its rather dry environment attracted only a few Kikuyu settlers. By the early 1950s infiltration of the area by Kamba herdsmen had virtually made it an extension of the Kamba Land Unit.

Another important area in the agricultural history of Machakos District is Makueni. Though technically part of the Kamba Land Unit, Makueni
remained unoccupied until the late 1940s when the government started a settlement scheme there. Tsetse fly and wildlife infestation prohibited human habitation of the area until the government initiated reclamation measures with a view to facilitating a settlement scheme.

In very broad terms, the foregoing is the spatial context in which 'The Machakos Problem' originated and developed over time. The colonial state set up 'concrete walls' around the Akamba by designating land as shown in Table 1 and Map 3. Out of their small reserves the Machakos Akamba were expected to sustain themselves and produce tribute for a government which did very little to help them improve their means of production. The result was a rapid deterioration of land resources, a phenomenon which was blamed on the victims. Indeed, land degradation in the reserve was so advanced by 1925 that the District Commissioner (D.C.) accused the Akamba of "living on their capital - the land" by overstocking it (KNA/DC/MKS/ 1/1/15, 1925 : 6).

2. For details on the colonial practice of blaming peasants for over-exploiting the environment see Blaikie, 1985 : 53-70.
Table 1: LAND SITUATION IN MACHAKOS DISTRICT (1918)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Native Reserves:</td>
<td>Ulu (Machakos) 1,650 sq. miles [4,274 km²]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kikumbulyu 432 &quot; &quot; [1,119 &quot; ]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crown Land:</td>
<td>Alienated Area 725 &quot; &quot; [1,878 &quot; ]</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unalienated Area 2,468 &quot; &quot; [6,392 &quot; ]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,275 sq.miles [13,663 km²]</td>
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Sources: KNA/DC/MKS 1/1/10,1917 : 502; KNA/DC/MKS 1/4/6:143.

1:2 Statement of the Problem

'Why blame nature?' is a question often asked in serious analyses of agrarian crises. The object of the question being to underline the complexity of agrarian crises rather than to discount the role nature may play in generating such crises. In a nutshell, the argument is that what appears as nature-induced crises are usually socially-induced crises. Even in Machakos District where food crises have for long been blamed on nature, the social context of such crises did not escape the notice of the colonial administration. For example, in 1960, the Agricultural Officer observed:

The drought [sic] in fact is, to a large extent, self inflicted .... In this District one is very tempted to blame
nature - last year in Wamunyu nearly every shamba failed but in about a handful of cases some maize was harvested showing that it is man and not nature that prevented them from getting a crop (KNA/DC/MKS 1/102: 125).

The Agricultural Officer did not seek to unearth the socio-economic factors underlying the differential impact of drought on farmers sharing the same ecology. Consequently, he viewed the food shortage as self-inflicted. Had he investigated further he would have perhaps agreed with Copans (1983) that the super-exploitation of those who work the natural milieu provokes repercussion at the ecological level because they cannot adopt methods that are not detrimental to the environment. Thus, the exploited over-exploit the environment, thereby making it less productive and increasing their vulnerability to food crises.

All the same, agrarian crises such as famines are complex phenomena which are best understood in the specific historical context of the society in which they occur. This study therefore analyses the socio-ecological context of specific food crises in Machakos District in a historical perspective. In other words, the study attempts to explain why specific crises
occurred when they did. In details, what socio-ecological processes and events generated food crises in Machakos District during the colonial era? What impact did the crises have on the society? What influence did the crises have on government policy? How did the society react to government policies geared to prevention of the agrarian crises, and why? How effective were the measures taken by the government to solve the agrarian crises?

Specifically, the study outlines the Kamba food economy on the eve of colonisation, assesses the dynamics of that economy and shows how it was progressively altered by colonial capitalism. The impact of colonial practices (such as land alienation, demand for labour, taxation, quarantines etc) on food production and acquisition are examined. Similarly, the role played by international crises like the two world wars, economic recessions and booms in intensifying the agrarian crises is analysed.

The study also shows and evaluates the various ways the Machakos Akamba responded to the agrarian crises. These responses included migration to areas outside the district, squatting on European farms and
migration of labour.

The effectiveness of the measures instituted by the colonial state to deal with agrarian crises is also discussed. Such measures included land reconditioning activities like planting of trees and grass, contour terracing and closure of denuded pasture land to livestock. Others were forced culling of livestock (destocking), initiation of settlement schemes and the introduction of cash crops.

Although most of the food crises which occurred in Machakos District during the colonial period did not result in heavy mortality, they nevertheless deserve to be called famines because of their adverse effects on the society. Thus the suffering these food shortages caused to the majority of the Akamba of Machakos made them such memorable events that they have specific names. Indeed, both the Akamba and the European officers who served in the district referred to these food crises as famines.

Generally, the Akamba used the term famine (Yua) to denote a general shortage of all types of food in the
society. In the early colonial period, for example, famine conditions existed when there was such a shortage of sorghum and millets that these food-stuffs had to be 'imported' from outside the community. But by 1940 maize had superseded these cereals and its scarcity constituted famine conditions. In short, any situation which necessitated large scale importation of food-stuffs into the district constituted a famine.

Depending on the specific conditions of each famine, the Akamba resorted to a variety of coping mechanisms. For example, during the late nineteenth century, coping strategies included: intra- and inter-community food trade; temporary and sometimes permanent migration to Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro regions; supplementing available grains with cattle blood, wild fruits/vegetables, game meat etc (Kaisa; Maingi, O.I. 1990). Similarly, reciprocal relationships between households inhabiting different ecological zones in the district, and even with families in other communities, became useful during food crises (Mbuva; Mutyanzau, O.I. 1990).

But with the gradual entrenchment of capitalism in the society, most of these survival strategies
became invalid. From about 1930, sale of livestock and wage labour became the chief sources of money for buying food in local shops. Other survival strategies during this period included transfer of livestock to neighbouring districts, squatting on European farms, sale of livestock products, sale of sugar cane/honey beer, sale of sisal and petty trade (Mbuvi; Mue, O.I. 1990). These and other strategies are discussed under specific famines in the study.

1:3 Research Premises

The study is based on the following premises:

1. On the eve of colonial rule the Akamba had developed a complex agro-pastoral economy which suited their ecology, satisfied most of their food needs and enabled them to acquire food from their neighbours in times of crises.

2. A variety of mechanisms initiated by the colonial state in an endeavour to promote colonial capitalism progressively undermined the foundations of Kamba food production, thereby increasing the
community's vulnerability to environmental perturbations.

3. The impact of colonialism on the Machakos Akamba varied from one area of the district to another and between the pastoral and agricultural sectors of the economy.

4. The nature of food crises in the district changed over time in line with social, political, economic and ecological changes.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study argues that food crises are best understood in the historical context of the society in which they occur. In other words, food crises are inseparable from a society's system of production and distribution. An inquiry into food crises in colonial Machakos therefore inevitably involves an investigation into the impact of colonial capitalism on Kamba society.

As Cliffe and Lawrence (1979: 1-3) argue, the impact of capitalism on African agricultural systems has been far-reaching. On the one hand, capitalism has altered African forms of production and the
superstructures on which they were built (property rights, division of labour, patterns of kinship etc). On the other hand, capitalism has adversely affected the interrelationship between African societies and their environments. In sum, the articulation of African modes of production with the capitalist mode of production has been detrimental to the former. It is in this connection that our study adopts the theoretical perspective of articulation of modes of production, a paradigm whose dynamism is useful in analysing food crises in the context of a changing society and ecology.

Theoretical interpretations of Africa's experience with capitalism fall into three broad perspectives. These are modernisation, underdevelopment (dependency) and articulation of modes of production. To some extent, these perspectives have historically succeeded one another. Thus, the dependency perspective arose as a critique of the modernisation perspective whereas articulation of modes of production is a critique of the underdevelopment perspective.

The paradigm of articulation of modes of production combines concepts of the dependency perspective (unequal exchange, the changing international
division of labour, unequal development etc) with Marxist concerns of accumulation within the sphere of production and the processes of class formation and class struggle. The paradigm is therefore an analytical approach within Marxist political economy. It is therefore explicitly historical, inter-disciplinary and inter-meshes the so-called political, economic and social factors of change in one on-going historical process (Gutkind and Wallerstein, 1976). But unlike classical Marxism, which treats capitalism as an implacable entity redefining social structures through its own requirements, articulation of modes of production emphasises Africans' response to capitalism (Cooper, 1981: 2).

The concept of articulation of modes of production therefore explains the process of penetration, interaction and conflict between the capitalist mode of production and pre-capitalist modes of production (Kinyanjui, 1979: 11). It also examines the role of the colonial state in the process of interaction between the capitalist mode and indigenous modes (Lonsdale and Berman, 1979; Berman and Lonsdale, 1980). In other words, the approach is suited to the study of
colonial capitalism.

According to the perspective, the introduction of the capitalist mode of production did not eliminate pre-capitalist modes but rather reshaped them. Thus, indigenous modes of production were progressively subordinated to the capitalist mode through a process of dissolution, conservation and transformation. In colonial Kenya, for example, land alienation, taxation and forced labour were some of the mechanisms used by the colonial state to erode or dissolve the 'self-sufficiency' of African economies. Yet some aspects of pre-capitalist African economies such as land tenure systems were left undisturbed so that these economies could reproduce cheap labour, thereby subsidising capital.

Indeed, attempts at dissolution and conservation of pre-capitalist social systems in order to serve the needs of the colonial system pervaded every sphere of social life. But such attempts were not always successful for they were usually resisted by the colonised. The following comments by a Machakos D.C. in 1952 illustrate some of the contradictions inherent in the articulation process:
The greatest weakness in the Government structure is the Headman and Sub-headmen (Asili). Considering their low wages - they start on Shs 28 a month or very much less than the cost of a manual labourer - it is surprising that we get services as good as we do. We are, of course, still tapping resources of the old indigenous Government, the Elders of the Motui [villages], but the springs are running dry. In this age of education and material needs, new standards are rising; age gets little respect in its own right, and all need money (KNA/DC/MKS 1/1/30, 1952: 3).

As much as the government wished to benefit from cheap administration at the low ranks it could only do so at the expense of efficiency. Thus, the administrative cadre perceived as a remnant of the indigenous form of government could only be made efficient through monetary incentives.

The articulation process was not confined to conservation and dissolution of indigenous social systems. In some cases it involved 'revival' or manipulation of ill-perceived 'traditional' practices in order to serve colonial objectives. This was common in times of crisis. For example, in the 1940s when land degradation threatened peasant production in Kenya, the colonial government revived communal
work-groups in an endeavour to promote soil conservation
in the then Central Province. Likewise, group farming
was instituted in the then Nyanza Province and organised
around such institutions as the \textit{risaga} communal work-
groups in Kisii and \textit{Liguru} clan elders in Buluyia.
However, these efforts did not succeed because they were
out of context. The colonial administration therefore
decided to intensify 'individualism' by promoting
individual land tenure, production of cash crops, etc

Nor was conservation, dissolution, revival and
distortion of pre-colonial African practices confined
to Kenya. It was a common practice in colonial Africa.
For example, during the Second World War, the
protectorate government in Botswana established 'warlands'
where communal labour was applied in the production of
food for the war effort. Ostensibly, the warlands system
was based on a traditional practice whereby the ruling
aristocracy extracted labour power through feudal
obligations. These obligations included a system of
regimental labour which cultivated tribute lands
attached to the office of chieftainship. However, while
traditional Tswana chiefs redistributed the grain from
tribute land to the poor, the colonial government mobilised the produce from the warlands to feed imperial armies in distant lands (Bhila, 1984).

These examples demonstrate not only the significant role of the colonial state in the process of articulation but also the diversity of pre-capitalist institutions involved. Therefore the articulation process should not be seen in narrow 'economist' terms. Furthermore, the pre-capitalist mode of production in question should be clearly specified for different pre-capitalist modes articulated differently with capitalism.

Generally, the colonial state intervened in the operation of the economy. In Kenya, for example, the colonial state facilitated the penetration of capitalism and growth of capitalist relations, and mediated the colony's external dependency right from conquest to the time of independence. Initially, the state acted as an instrument of primitive accumulation by mobilising African resources (land, labour, livestock etc.) for production in the European sector. Later, the state used more subtle mechanisms to promote settler production at the expense of African production.
Facilities such as transport networks, agricultural research, marketing, credit, extension services and even pricing mechanisms, were all biased against African production.

But the dominance of settler production did not hinder the growth of peasant production. Nor did the colonial state completely ignore the African sector. Under normal circumstances, peasant production was encouraged as an important tax base while in times of crises, such as the recession of the early 1920s and the Great Depression (1929-35), peasant production was encouraged in order to boost exports and therefore the colony's revenue. Similarly, when the British economy was in a crisis after the Second World War, bias towards the settler sector was abandoned in favour of an all-round development strategy which would serve wider imperial interests (Heyer, 1981; Smith, 1976).

African response to the state-managed economy varied in space and time, and influenced conditions within the African economies themselves as well as government policy. Depending on the economic opportunities open or available to them, Kenya Africans responded in a variety of ways. Some became wage-earners,
others produced cash crops, other became squatters on European farms, etc (see Van Zwanenberg, 1972). In other words, historically and geographically specific and varied modes of production in Kenya were diversely articulated to imperial capitalism through the agency of the colonial state. In fact, responses to colonial capitalism varied not only between different modes (systems) of production but also within them. As Berman and Lonsdale (1980: 60) state:

The form of articulation varied according to the particular character of capitalist penetration, the nature of the indigenous modes of production, and the local ecology and resource endowment.

But what is a mode of production? As the primary tool of analysis in the concept of articulation, 'mode of production' is an abstraction which links the material realities of everyday life to the society in which they occur. A mode of production is therefore defined by a society's forces of production and the corresponding relations of production. Thus, the interrelationship between forces of production (labour and technology) and the social relations of production (extraction and distribution of surplus) make up a
society's mode of production or its economic structure. But the economic structure of a society is also intertwined with its social forms of thought or superstructure (law, politics, religion etc.). Therefore the concept of 'mode of production' encompasses a society's economic structure as well as its superstructure (Crummey and Stewart, 1981).

However, the concrete object of analysis, the actual historical society or social formation, is rarely characterised by a single mode of production. Instead, a social formation exhibits a situation of interacting modes, though one of them dominates over the other(s). A social formation is therefore identified with its dominant mode although the other mode(s) should not be ignored altogether (Onimonde, 1985; Amin, 1974). In pre-colonial African formations, for example, the dominant modes of production were either feudal, tributary, slave or pastoral (Cliffe, 1977). Each of these modes was incorporated into international capitalism on different terms.

It should be noted that the above named African modes of production are broad categories and do not cover the diverse and complex historical reality of
Africa. For example, two social formations dominated by the lineage mode of production may exhibit different patterns of kinship ties (Zeleza, 1985). There is therefore a need for specification of the pre-capitalist mode in question, and adherence to elucidation of the problems of the generation and circulation of surplus rather than labelling of social formations. Once the dynamics of the particular social formation are known, it is easy to analyse its articulation with capitalism.

The capitalist mode of production is characterised by ownership of the means of production by an entrepreneur (capitalist), who hires 'free' labour and uses it to produce commodities. These commodities realise a profit (surplus value) when sold in the market. The principal law of motion of the mode is the necessity to earn profit, which is re-invested to produce more surplus. State intervention in this process during the colonial era engendered colonial capitalism.

In sum, the perspective of articulation of modes of production traces the process through which pre-capitalist societies were penetrated by the forces
of capitalist imperialism. This was generally a complex, conflict-ridden and unstable process. As Berman (1984: 414) stresses, articulation "was a partly deliberate and partly an unforseen and unintended process of uncertainty and struggle which ... rarely corresponded precisely with the intention or interests of the historical actors". Hence the need to appreciate the crucial and contradictory role of the colonial state in the process and the variable responses of African societies in resisting or embracing capitalism.

1:5 Review of Related Literature

The food crisis in Africa has been the object of scholarly attention for some time now. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have made their contributions to the study of the crisis by tracing its roots, analysing its present forms and even predicting its future. Consequently, a vast literature on the subject exists. The following is a review of some of the literature which is pertinent to this study in terms of content and theory.

One of the few historical studies of famine in a Kenyan community is by Ochieng' (1988). This brief
study of colonial famines in Luoland shows how colonial rule rendered the Luo community vulnerable to food shortages in spite of the favourable ecology of Luoland and a suitable mixed economy of seed culture and pastoral activity. The author blames the colonial state, whose policies were basically meant to support a settler economy, for turning Luoland into a reservoir of cheap labour through tax demands, forcible labour recruitment and conscription into the colonial army during the two world wars. The drain on labour, production of cash crops (cotton, simsim etc) and government acquisition of food-stuffs during the wars are cited as some of the factors behind famines in Luoland.

A similar study of famines among the Mijikenda in the 1880 - 1980 period has been done by Herlehy (1984). His findings challenge allegations by some scholars that the incorporation of East Africa into the world economy led to a definite rise in the material standards of the people. By examining specific famines, Herlehy establishes that during the period under review, the Mijikenda survived famines through their own initiatives rather than through dependence on the government for famine relief. He convincingly argues that the Mijikenda were resourceful in coping with
drought and famine, and that the colonial state increased their vulnerability through such measures as restrictions on a long established squatting system, prohibition against wine trade and the government's bias toward the settler community.

These two studies provide useful insights for our study as they show some of the ways the communities studied were affected by colonialism. However, both studies are not only brief but tend to generalise the effects of colonialism on the societies studied. In other words, the studies do not show the social structure that emerged from the process of articulation and how that transformation was reflected in food crises. This study of another community with a somewhat different socio-ecological background therefore augments the findings of the two cited studies.

Historical studies which touch on Machakos District have noted the significance of famines among the Kamba community in the past. Such studies include Ambler (1983), Cummings (1975), Jackson (1972 and 1976), Kimambo (1968), Lindblom (1920) and Tignor (1976). Although none of these works discusses famines in detail, they are nevertheless useful to this study as they
provide useful information for the study of food crises in the Kamba community. For example, Kimambo's study on the economic history of the Akamba from 1850-1950 "is an outline of the way the Kamba were continuously adapting themselves to new economic situations" (Kimambo, 1968: 79).

Perhaps the studies that have closest affinity to food problems in Machakos District are those by Owako (1969), Munro (1975) and Bowles (1979). Owako examines the land and population problems in the district up to 1966. His study basically examines the problem of adjustment between man and his environment. The study therefore identifies three basic problems: the problem of adjusting agricultural techniques not only to cope with a rapidly growing population but also with the vagaries of weather; the problem of adjusting land-use methods to a delicate environment; and the problem of adjusting population growth to available land. The study concludes that failure to strike a balance between the three 'problems' gave rise to environmental deterioration, population pressure and recurrent famines.

Owako's study does not discuss famines in detail. Moreover, he subscribes to the imperialist view that
"prior to the British intervention, nature had its own way and the environmental balance was maintained through epidemics, inter-tribal warfares and famines, which used to take tolls of many lives" (Owako, 1969: 78). He therefore attributes environmental deterioration to over-population and overstocking, which he thinks were consequences of the removal of human and livestock scourges by Pax Britannica. The study therefore does not identify the real basis of agrarian crises, though the author cites land alienation, neglect of African agriculture and quarantine regulations as some contributory factors.

Munro (1975) in a work on social change among the Machakos Akamba devotes a chapter to agrarian distress in the district prior to 1939. He also discusses the impact of the distress in terms of political activities resulting from forced culling of livestock (destocking) and land reconditioning measures. However, he does not discuss the impact of the distress in terms of food problems. He also subscribes to the notion of modernisation by claiming that in the period 1900 to 1940 food supply and nutrition standards improved. The development of rail and road transport and the growth of a marketing system
brought new conditions to people who, inhabiting a marginal area of the highlands, had a long experience of periodic drought and dearth (Munro, 1975:192).

As the present study shows, improved transport and distribution networks were not a panacea for food problems. Furthermore, the views advanced by Owako and Munro to the effect that life in the nineteenth century was precarious and full of uncertainty have been questioned by historians (see Kuczynski, 1949; Koponen, 1988). The damage caused by the human and animal epidemics of the late pre-colonial period (most of which were new in the African environment) cannot be automatically projected backwards for the earlier pre-colonial period. It has also been shown that the early colonial period was marked by a decline in population, a situation which did not change until the 1920s (ibid). Moreover, the land-population problem was already manifest in Machakos District when the much popularised Western medicine and veterinary services were introduced on a small scale in the 1920s. Despite these shortcomings, the works by Munro and Owako are valuable resource material for this study.

Bowles' (1979) work on some ecological and dietary aspects of agricultural underdevelopment in colonial Kenya draws most of its illustrations from Ukambani (Machakos and Kitui). Although no specific crises are discussed in the work, the author convincingly argues that poor land-use, the major cause of erosion, "was a regression of technique forced upon peasants by the direct and indirect pressures of the colonial state."
(Bowles, 1979: 199). For instance, the colonial state's demand for a monetary tribute (tax), and the dominance of maize as a cash crop, forced peasants to abandon inter-cropping for maize mono-culture. The result was malnutrition and soil erosion as peasants reduced the range of crops they had been producing and concentrated on cultivating maize even in areas not suited to the crop.

Bowles also takes issue with some of the advice offered to peasants by agricultural officers. For example, he notes that "Poverty would have prevented the adoption of many of the most technically perfect devices for preventing soil erosion" (Bowles, 1979: 299). He concludes that ecological deterioration does not just occur but is a direct result of the pressures to increase and appropriate surplus.

Ecological change is a prominent concern in studies of food crises in Africa. Many scholars maintain that ecological change has been shaped by political, economic and social forces originating from colonial and post-colonial domination by the capitalist mode of production. On the whole, introduction of capitalism led to the breakdown of African systems of social and spatial organisation, a factor which not only made many Africans vulnerable to adverse weather conditions but also increased the risks of environmental damage (Bell, 1986: 196). For example, increasing commoditisation altered land-use patterns and impeded natural regenerative cycles (Schoepf, 1986: 201).
Sindiga (1981) has discussed the complex relationship between ecological, cultural and economic factors. His work shows how land alienation and other forms of colonial intervention in Maasai land-use patterns made that community vulnerable to drought and tsetse fly infestation. Sindiga maintains that resource degradation of the Maasai environment had its origins in British colonial policies. The degradation caused recurrent droughts, which resulted in loss of livestock and famine.

Another study by Deacon and Darkoh (1987) demonstrates that effects of drought such as starvation, poverty and ecological imbalance cannot be wholly blamed on nature. These scholars argue that such occurrences have their basis in colonial policies and post-independence initiatives or lack of them. Taking the Maasai and Kikuyu communities as case studies and through review of land tenure, colonial policies and practices, and post-independence initiatives and biases, the two scholars demonstrate that an impoverished population and environmental degradation cannot be blamed on natural factors.

Studies on other parts of Africa by Plange (1979), Van Alpeldoorn (1981), Kjekshus (1977) and Mascarenhas (1966) also indicate that the phenomenon of food shortages cannot be blamed on nature. Plange's study on the underdevelopment of northern Ghana in relation to the rest of that country dismisses as 'naturalistic fallacy' explanations solely based on natural conditions. He points out that anthropologists and historians
who use natural conditions (soil, climate etc) to explain the underdevelopment of northern Ghana forget that the region was the heart of trade routes and food production in the pre-colonial period. He further asserts that the region was turned into a labour reservoir for southern Ghana's cocoa and mining activities after the establishment of colonial rule.

Van Alpeldoorn's study is on drought and famine in Nigeria in the 1972-74 period. Paying special attention to the climatically 'difficult' northern region, he demonstrates that the Sahelian and Nigerian famines of the early 1970s were not essentially the small farmers' and pastoralists' fault as was commonly believed. He argues:

For a proper analysis of drought and famine we need to understand the international context of famine the defences of the traditional systems against disasters, and the partial transformation of the economic and social system during the first three-quarters of this century (van Alpeldoorn, 1981: 3).

Van Alpeldoorn's sentiments are also shared by Shenton (1984) and Shenton and Watts (1979) whose works are also on northern Nigeria. Shenton (1986) uses the concept of historical materialism to examine the development of the forces and relations of production of northern Nigerian communities under colonial rule. He concludes that the incorporation of northern Nigeria into the world capitalist system, while seeking to preserve rather than to transform pre-existing forces and social relations of production, intensified the region's
age-old vulnerability to threats of famine through exposure of the society to new threats of capitalist crises. Shenton and Watts (1979) also look at the impact of colonialism on the incidence of famine. They examine in great detail mechanisms existent in pre-colonial societies for coping with food shortage, and how these mechanisms were eroded by colonial practices such as taxation, commoditisation and labour migrancy. The two scholars conclude that hunger is a social phenomenon that cannot be understood through recourse to weather or Malthusian political economy.

Kjekshus (1977) also takes issue with colonialism for being behind some of the famines that have occurred in East Africa in the past. He specifically cites the introduction of new human and animal diseases, and the way colonial rule was established (through policies of pacification, procurement of food-stuffs, and labour recruitment) as some of the factors which led to famines. He also abhors the introduction of "commercial virtues that removed the margin of surplus security of stock or storage that separated the East African peasant from famine and the eventuality of crop failure during the next planting season" (Kjekshus, 1977: 43).

After scrutinising some of the literature on food shortages, Mascarenhas (1966) feels that climatic aspects, especially hazards of the tropical environment, are too readily presented as explanations. This approach, he feels, tends to
make food shortages in the tropics totally an environmental problem, thereby brushing aside the cultural aspect of food shortages. He concludes that the imposition elements of colonial policy vis-a-vis traditional agricultural systems created a situation which inevitably had great impact on food supplies. He further states that the end of colonial status did not necessarily resolve these tensions and problems of the colonial past.

At the continental level are works by Ball (1976), Lofchie (1975), Lofchie and Commins (1982), Zeleza (1986), etc. Lofchie (1975) takes issue with those social scientists who take it for granted that the causes of African famines are natural and climatic. He blames them for overlooking political and economic factors, which he argues are at the root of the crisis. He goes on to say that policy prescriptions informed by a predominantly non-political view of the world tend to consist of technical and administrative recommendations. Such recommendations, he says, stress on the need for irrigation programmes, more modern and weather-resistant agricultural practices, and the introduction of high yield varieties of seed. He further argues that these policies do not reflect on political and economic arrangements which, more than changes in climate and rainfall, are at the root of human suffering. He also blames Africa's hunger on dualistic agricultural policies characterised by well-provided-for export sectors and impoverished food sectors.
Ball (1976) tries to correct the view that factors underlying drought are different from those causing famine. He tries to show why drought should be properly seen as resulting from a combination of social, political, economic and environmental factors. Citing the example of French colonial practice in West Africa, Ball demonstrates how attempts by colonial administrators to integrate peasants and herders into a monetised, commercialised economy led to ecological degradation through over-cultivation and over-grazing. The need to raise money for taxes and other purposes while maintaining consumption levels destroyed the environment and the overall result was that the usual amount of rainfall became less effective.

Lofchie and Commins (1982) not only decry the grim fact that one-third of Africa's people suffer from some form of malnutrition due to inadequate food supply but also point out Africa's deepening dependency on food imports. They also lament that Africa is not only unable to feed herself but is also experiencing environmental degradation even in areas of high rainfall such as Zaire, Zambia and the West African coast. Although they are of the view that pre-colonial African agricultural systems were not models of pristine harmony, they insist that these systems did work reasonably well when compared with much of what has occurred since the beginning of the colonial era. They maintain that "when calamities of deprivation did occur, they tended to be the result of natural
disaster rather than maldistribution in the economic system" (Lofchie and Commins, 198: 17). They therefore conclude that the extensive starvation that accompanies contemporary food shortages is a result of social structures characterised by wide gaps in wealth and poverty, something which was less common in pre-colonial Africa.

Zeleza (1986) seeks to demonstrate the complexity and contradictions inherent in Africa's agrarian crisis by looking at its historical and global context. He is of the view that Africa's hunger is rooted in deep social and economic problems and not in nature. He contends that although colonialism did not entirely transform African societies, it drastically affected their social and ecological organisation and responses to food problems. On the basis of massive statistical data, he concludes that Africa is agriculturally productive, but production for export is given more emphasis than production for domestic consumption.

From the reviewed literature, it is clear that the consolidation of once autonomous and discrete rural communities into states and the incorporation of these states into the world economic system through the colonial process altered the context of food crises in Africa. However, the impact of colonialism on African societies was more complex than some scholars have portrayed. Suret-Canale (1971: 297), for example, has argued:
The pre-colonial crop system, within the traditional social setting provided a complete and permanent equilibrium between man and nature. Compelled hereafter with means which were unchanged, to provide for his own subsistence and to furnish a surplus of export products as well, the peasant succeeded only in reducing this subsistence to a minimum, or even below ....Every year there was famine. Malnutrition became a permanent feature. Any natural or economic catastrophe, such as a bad harvest or falling prices naturally resulted in famine...

It is true that the impact of colonialism on African production systems was to a large extent debilitating, but a situation of permanent equilibrium between man and nature cannot be generalised even to the smallest of pre-colonial African villages.

Such generalisations conceal vast differences in the way various social systems were articulated to colonialism, the processes of social differentiation within specific modes of production, and the manifestation of these differences in food production and acquisition. The present study attempts to meet that challenge by tracing changes in the nature of food crises in a specific African community as the community was progressively articulated to capitalism.

1:6 Justification of the Study

Although the study of food problems in Africa has attracted scholars from different disciplines, the Kenyan scene has generally been neglected, especially by historians. This
is a serious omission for two reasons. First, food problems are known to have occurred in most Kenyan communities in the past (Ojany and Ogendo, 1975: 63-64; Van Zwanenberg with King, 1975: 6, 85-86). However, little research has been done on these famines. No wonder famine is viewed as the natural outcome of a hazardous Kenyan environment in the two cited documents. Indeed, some scholars have actually lamented the fact that "historians have undertaken little research on famine" (Van Zwanenberg with King, 1975: 85).

Secondly, the historical approach, which is both spatial and temporal, is suitable for understanding the processes that lead to and follow food crises. In fact, the historical approach offers a good starting point for assessing the impact of past 'development' strategies, such as those pursued by the colonial state. Such assessment can then be extended to current strategies; for as Ball (1976) argues, it will be impossible to reverse trends towards food scarcity until the causes of famines are examined and understood.

Machakos District, the geographical unit of this study, was chosen because of its complex agrarian problems in the past. In fact, during the colonial era, the district had the worst soil erosion problem in the colony. Consequently, 'overstocking' and food shortages were perpetual problems. For example, from 1943 to 1961, the district imported maize in 15 out of 19 years, and in 7 of these years there was severe famine (Porter, 1972: 35). However, the causes and nature of food crises varied from
one part of the district to the other depending on such factors as ecology and proximity to commodity markets. This study therefore contributes to historical knowledge by analysing the effects of colonial capitalism on Kamba society and its ecology.

1:7 Methodology

Primary data for this study was obtained from archival and oral sources. Archival sources at the Kenya National Archives (KNA) and the Ministry of Agriculture Library (at Kilimo House) included District and Provincial Annual Reports, Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, Political Record Books, Handing-Over Reports, Minutes of the Machakos Local Native Council, Memoranda on issues like soil erosion, etc.

Data from archival sources was cross-checked with and supplemented by data from oral interviews. The areas visited for the interviews are the six locations of the former Mbooni Division (Kibauni, Kisau, Kiteta, Mbooni, Muthetheni and Tulimani). Other areas visited were Kikumbulyu, Matungulu and Kangundo locations.

These particular areas of the district were chosen because of the following reasons: Mbooni Division provides a representative sample of the district's major agro-ecological zones and has areas that were the epitome of soil erosion in Machakos during the colonial era; Kikumbulyu location is one
area in Machakos District where the demands of White settlers constantly clashed with those of the local people; and Matungulu and Kangundo embraced commercial agriculture at an early date and therefore represent the so-called progressive areas. In short, the sampled areas reflect some important aspects of 'The Machakos Problem'.

Oral interviews comprised long sessions of in-depth interviewing of elderly men and women. These informants were identified with the help of local leaders (especially assistant chiefs). In most cases, interviews were conducted in the presence of someone known to both the interviewer and interviewee. This arrangement made interviews as informal as possible.

In all cases, information was recorded on cassettes. Interviewees did not object to the use of a tape-recorder for they were approached through someone known to them and the reasons for using the device were explained beforehand. The use of a tape-recorder made the interview sessions all the more informal as the interviewer did not have to waste time writing all of an informant's responses. The research questionnaire therefore remained a guide and not a fixed device. However, efforts were made to harness optimum information.

Transcription of recorded information was done as soon as conditions allowed. This ensured that the information was put in writing while the meaning the interviewee expressed was
still fresh in the interviewer's mind. Information obtained from one informant was then compared with that from other informants. This also enabled the interviewer to plan future interviews by assessing which areas of the data needed greater coverage.

The analysis of primary data was enhanced by information obtained from journals, books, government publications and unpublished papers, reports, theses and dissertations. These secondary sources were particularly useful for corroboration, comparison and theoretical interpretation of the primary information.

On the whole, this study attempts to integrate data and theory; for as Beckman (1980: 54) correctly argues:

Evidence on its own is neither here nor there. Its significance depends on the interpretation given to it, which again is determined by the theoretical position taken. Evidence is selected, ordered and interpreted from a given theoretical position.

The data harnessed was therefore analysed in a materialist perspective, a perspective which is explicitly historical, inter-disciplinary and critical. The perspective draws heavily on the work of Marx and his successors, and is concerned with the intersection of the organisation of production, the structure of political power, the nature of social structure and the significance of labour alienation and ideology.
Thus, the concept of modes of production is a logical historical method of analysis which draws heavily on Marx's methodology of historical materialism. Its philosophical outlook at nature and social phenomena is guided by the notion of dialectical materialism. Therefore, our method of analysis and interpretation is historically and dialectically derived in accordance with Marxist world view.
CHAPTER TWO

2:0 PRE-COLONIAL KAMBA SOCIAL FORMATION IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

The assertion that geography is the crucible out of which history is made might be an overstatement, yet the complex interrelationship between the physical environment and human activity cannot be over-emphasised (Mazrui, 1986; Mwanzi, 1977; Ogot, 1979). Indeed, the relationship is such that:

If one wishes to understand a people and its [sic] development, one must have some knowledge of its [sic] milieu, the land it [sic] lives in and especially the climatic conditions (Lindblom, 1920: 22).

However, the natural environment is not static and changes in it effect changes on human activity, just as human activity causes changes in the natural milieu. In short, "man is a product of and a force in natural processes" (Sindiga, 1981: 28). History should therefore endeavour to explain the dialectical inter-change between humans and their natural environment (Sindiga, 1985).

But the relationship is not a mere man-nature equation. It is a question of the relationship between man and man in the process of production (Sheriff, 1985: 1). Therefore comprehension of environmentally-related problems, such as food crises, requires delving deep into man's relationship with nature and the
nature of human society. Hence, history should be both social and natural because "social relations are always relations of men and men, of men and nature" (Copans, 1983: 89).

In that connection, this chapter provides background information for the rest of this study. The first section presents an outline of the environmental potential and limitations of Machakos District while the rest of the chapter examines how the Akamba interacted with their environment in the late nineteenth century. The overall aim is to present and analyse the background against which agrarian crises in the colonial period occurred. Under colonialism, the Akamba did not interact freely with their environment; instead they responded to various stimuli by the colonial state. Their economic practices were therefore prescribed by official policy. Indeed, this was the midwifery role of the colonial state in the articulation between the capitalist mode of production and the traditional Kamba economy.

2:1 Physical Environment

Land in Machakos District rises from slightly below 600 m above sea level in the extreme south to 1,100 m in the north-east and 1,600 m in the north-west. In the centre of the district are hills and small plateaus such as Kangundo, Iveti, Mbooni, Mua and Kilungu (Map 4). These massifs rise to a height of 1,800 - 2,100 m and are surrounded by a large plateau which is elevated to about 1,700 m in the west and slopes down to 700 m
Machakos District in the Pre-Colonial Period

Map 4: Machakos District in the Pre-Colonial Period

Source: Munro, 1975:13.
Both the hills and the surrounding plateau are of ancient basement rocks, mainly schists and gneisses. However, the basement system is broken in the north-west by the volcanic Ol Donyo Sabuk (2,144 m) and in the south-west by the volcanic Chyulu Hills. Similarly, the basement system is overlain by the volcanic outflow of the Yatta Plateau in the east. The Athi-Kapiti plains in the western and north-western parts of the district are also of volcanic origin (Kenya, 1989:1; Jaetzold and Schimidt, 1985:149).

Rainfall and temperatures are the two major climatic factors which influence agricultural activities in Machakos District. These two factors are in turn influenced by altitude, such that rainfall increases with rise in altitude while temperatures decrease with increase in altitude. Consequently, the hill masses are cooler and wetter than the surrounding lowlands. Agriculture is therefore more intensive in the hill areas than in the lowlands. However, crops mature faster and with less rain in the warmer climate of the lowlands than they do in the hills (KNA/DC/MKS 8/3:8).

The average annual rainfall ranges from slightly over 1,000 mm in some of the highlands to slightly below 500 mm in the low-lying southern and south-eastern parts of the district (Map 5; Table 2). This rain falls in two seasons: the 'short rains' start in October and continue through December while the
Map 5: MACHAKOS DISTRICT: MEAN ANNUAL RAINFALL AND REGIME

'long rains' begin in March and continue through May. The months of January, February, August and September are therefore hot and dry whereas June and July are cool and cloudy. On the whole the district has a mean annual temperature of about 25°C (Kivuto, 1972: 13-15).

Table 2: RAINFALL FIGURES FOR SOME STATIONS IN MACHAKOS DISTRICT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Number of Years of Recording</th>
<th>Average Yearly Total Rainfall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Machakos</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kangundo</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilungu</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matiliku</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mwala</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultan Hamud</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iveti</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>52.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makindu</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>23.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mtito Andei</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makueni</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiteta</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbooni</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>42.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matungulu</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kibwezi</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>24.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Soils in the district vary according to factors such as parent rock, relief and rainfall. Generally, red friable clay-loams predominate on the hills while brown sandy clay-loams, often with a laterite horizon, are common on the lower slopes.
of the hills and on the lowlands. As a result, the hill areas have more fertile and deeper soils than the surrounding lowlands (Owako, 1971:177-78).

The variations in rainfall and soils are equally reflected in the vegetation patterns, and ultimately in the ecological zones for vegetation is an integration of all climatic and soil factors. Areas higher than 1,364 m above sea level in the district belong to the Star Grass Zone and once supported forests and a variety of grasses. Immediately below the Star Grass Zone is the Grass Woodland Zone of the lower slopes of the hills (1,212 - 1,364 m). On the lowlands the Acacia-Combretus zone is predominant but gives way to Acacia-Commiphora bush in the southern parts of the district (Ominde, 1968: 44-46).

Rainfall is by far the most important factor in the Machakos environment. On the basis of average annual rainfall, the agricultural potential of the district falls into three broad categories (Map 6). The first is high potential land and consists of areas in the district which receive over 889 mm of rainfall in a year. This land is mainly within the hill masses and is about 10 per cent of the district's total area. Areas which receive 635 - 889 mm of rainfall in the district are classified as medium potential land. This category forms 54.2 per cent of the district's area and comprises the Eastern Plains, the Yatta Plateau, North Yatta Plains and parts of Kikumbulyu Plains. The rest of the district (35.8 per cent) receives less than 635 mm of rain in a year and is therefore low potential
MACHAKOS DISTRICT: AGRICULTURAL POTENTIAL AND LAND CATEGORIES

Map 6: MACHAKOS DISTRICT: AGRICULTURAL POTENTIAL AND LAND CATEGORIES

Lands of High Potential
Over 35 inches rainfall (889 mm)

Lands of Medium Potential
25-35 inches rainfall (635-889 mm)

Rangelands
Below 25 inches rainfall (635 mm)

0 10 20 30 MILES
0 20 40 KILOMETRES

land. This land is mainly rangeland and is made up of the Athi-Kapiti Plains and the greater part of Kikumbulyu Plains (Owako, 1971: 80).

In terms of surface water resources, Machakos District is poorly endowed. Most of the district is drained by River Athi and its tributaries except for the northernmost parts which are drained by Tana and Thika rivers (Map 1). River Athi is the only major perennial river in the district, although some of the hill massifs have perennial streams whose flow is intermittent at low altitude. Some of the seasonal rivers also have sub-surface water in their sandy beds during the dry season (Kenya, 1981: 1).

The above summary of the geography of Machakos District is the basis for understanding the challenges the natural resources of the area have posed to human activity in the past. For example, it is not possible to reconstruct the pre-colonial Kamba social formation without recourse to the environmental potential of the area, for the geography of an area does affect a people's way of life (Mwanzi, 1977: vii). Similarly, the environment without people is meaningless because 'nature' is not natural but is 'produced' by different social systems. The following section therefore examines the Kamba system of production in the late nineteenth century as a base for assessing the impact of colonialism on the society.
Kamba System of Production in the late 19th Century

The pre-colonial history of the Akamba suggests a society whose development was closely linked to the environment. In the early sixteenth century, the Akamba were living on the plains around Mount Kilimanjaro, and were probably semi-nomadic. In this semi-arid area the Akamba kept livestock, hunted wildlife and collected edible plants and roots. They were probably organised in small kin-groups.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the Akamba began to move out of the Kilimanjaro Plains due to competition for resources with the Maasai and other groups (Jackson, 1976; Feddars, 1979). A northward movement led them to the Chyulu Hills. Unfortunately, the area was exceedingly rocky, poor in water resources and the higher reaches were impenetrable. They later moved on to Kibwezi Plains, but long seasonal droughts in the area forced them to move further north until they reached the Mbooni Hills in the mid-seventeenth century. Mbooni Hills, with their heavy forests, high rainfall, innumerable streams and fertile soils, accorded the Akamba the type of environment they had been looking for. However, the Mbooni environment did not hold them together for long.

By the early eighteenth century, signs of population pressure (such as soil depletion, diminishing natural resources, and border clashes between different sections of the community) had began to appear at Mbooni. Consequently, small groups of
migrants began to cross the Athi River into central Kitui as early as 1715 (Map 7). These migrations to Kitui intensified in the 1740-1780 period. At the same time, the Mbooni community started to expand into areas around Mbooni, such as Kaumoni and Kisau. By 1800, the Akamba were in the process of colonising Nzaui, Mbitini, Mukaa and Kilungu. Then followed the occupation of Muvuti and Iveti in around 1850, and Kangundo in the 1880s and 1890s. The last major population movement was the occupation of Matungulu in 1900 (Tignor, 1976:17; Map 8). In short, the Akamba were still colonising land in the Machakos area when British colonialism halted further expansion.

Indeed, territorial expansion was a dominant feature of the pre-colonial Kamba society right from its arrival at Mbooni Hills. The society's economy (based on shifting cultivation, pastoralism and hunting) required an ever-expanding frontier of settlement as natural resources tended to degenerate fast. This mode of life gave rise to social institutions which, though modified over time to suit changing circumstances, were characteristic of the whole society even after expansion from Mbooni. For example, social organisation tended to emphasise residence rather than clan ties. Consequently, Kamba society was fragmented into shallow lineages and small territorial organisations until the late nineteenth century.

1. Kikumbulyu was probably settled by people from Kitui in 1836 when a supposedly severe famine dislodged the Kamba communities from their homeland and led to establishment of Kamba colonies in places such as Kikotoni in Rabai (within the Coastal Mijikenda community).
Map 7: KAMBA MIGRATIONS IN THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA

Source: Jackson, 1976: 190, 204.
Map 8: MACHAKOS DISTRICT: ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARIES, 1925

Source: Munro, 1975: 59.
Outside the household, the most important kinship group was the lineage or Mbaa-group. Such a group was founded by an individual who moved into a new area and established a nuclear family, which grew into an extended family named after its founder. For instance Mbaa-Ngovu meant Ngovu's family. Such an extended family or lineage could congregate in the same area for up to four generations before some of its members hived off to found their own Mbaa-groups elsewhere. Elders in the group handled everyday matters of the group such as marriage negotiations, inheritance and general welfare.

The other important form of social organisation was the territorially-based utui group. Individual pioneers moved into virgin land (weu) to establish their homesteads, and were joined by members of other clans who settled nearby. The new settlers together formed a territorially-defined settlement (utui pl. motui). To ensure peaceful and co-operative existence, the new settlers took the ndundu oath in which they swore to assist one another in everything.

Each utui was an independent unit. It had its own men's club (kisuka pl. isuka); a recreation ground (kituto pl. ituto); an administrative council (nzama) with its own bench of magistrates (asili sing. musili); its own warriors (anake sing. mwanake) and war leaders (athiani sing. muthiani). The utui also had its own place of sacrifice (ithembo pl. mathembo), where male and female elders of the utui sacrificed on behalf of the utui community (KNA/DC/MKS 7/1:8-9).
The area of the average utui was small. Its extent was determined by the physical features of the land. Thus, an utui was either a hill ridge, a hill outcrop or an area between two streams. However, for everyday matters of life, the utui was self-sufficient. For example, neighbours defended each other's property; the youth undertook work of mutual assistance (mwethya) such as hut-building and farm-work; and inter-marriage took place between the various lineages of the utui.

To prevent domination of utui affairs by any individual or family, gerontocracy was the form of political organisation in the utui. Thus, the general affairs of the utui were discussed by the men's club (kisuka) whose members were the married men (nthele) and elders (atumia sing. mutumia). Membership in the club was divided into six grades which were attainable after certain periods and after certain payments of livestock. Authority was therefore given to those with age and experience. On the whole, neighbourly co-operation was accompanied by egalitarian values which sought to maintain the status quo (Munro, 1975:14-15).

Several motui formed a larger territory, kivalo (pl. ivalo), which had institutions similar to those of the utui. However, the kivalo operated on special occasions when tasks considered too great for one utui were to be performed. For example, the kivalo council of elders (king'ole) met to discuss and sanction actions to be taken by the inhabitants of the

2. Married women too had grades which defined their public roles. Only men and women of the highest grades participated in nzama councils and in sacrifice.
entire kivalo, such as the execution of dangerous criminals and the dispatch of raiding parties.

The other major form of social organisation amongst the pre-colonial Akamba was the family or household. This consisted of a man, his wife or wives and their children. In most cases, married sons and their families remained in their father's compound until they had their own grown-up children. Generally, the household was the basic unit of production and consumption. However, each wife had her own cultivated plot(s) of land, grain stores and milking stock, but the head of the household had the ultimate control over the household's resources.

The role of the above institutions in reproducing the pre-colonial Kamba social formation is perhaps best analysed under specific aspects of the society's system of production. The rest of this section therefore examines aspects of the Kamba system of production in the late nineteenth century.

2:2:1 Land Tenure

The initial settlements of the Akamba in Mbooni were clan-based. Each of the twenty-five Kamba clans inhabited a particular section of the Mbooni massif (KNA/DC/MKS 7/1:7). However, territorial expansion within Mbooni led to intermingling of clans to the extent that they lost their significance in respect of land tenure. Later dispersal from Mbooni scattered Kamba clans throughout Ukambani.

Pre-colonial Kamba system of land tenure derived from the
process of pioneering into an unclaimed area. An individual went into the commonage (weu) and marked out a piece of land for cultivation (ng'undu). The land so marked became a permanent and inheritable possession. The individual also delimited pasture land (kisesi pl. isesi), either around the homestead or some distance away from the homestead in a specially built cattle-post (kyengo pl. syengo). Unlike ng'undu rights which were permanent, kisesi rights existed as long as the land was being used. When abandoned, kisesi land reverted to weu and anybody could colonise it.

Generally, claims to land were agreed upon and regulated by utui elders. They could limit the amount of weu an individual appropriated or refuse to admit certain individuals into their utui (Penwill, 1951:33). Consequently, a prospective settler offered beer and a goat (mbui ya mathanzu) to older settlers. These items were used in a ceremony in which the new settler took the ndundu oath, thereby committing himself and his household to co-operation in utui affairs. Such co-operation was important for defending frontier settlements from raids and for reciprocal obligations, especially in labour.

However, matters of inheritance or sale of land were regulated by the Mbaa-group. By virtue of their common ancestry, members of a Mbaa-group owned land jointly. But each married woman in the lineage had absolute rights of use of her farm-plot (mbee), and passed it on to her sons for an inheritance. However, such land could not be sold without the sanction of
lineage elders. If the sale was absolutely necessary, the next of kin had the first priority. In short, everything was done to ensure that the land was not sold outside the lineage. On the contrary, land that had been taken from the weu was essentially in the hands of the occupier and kinsmen had no rights in it. The occupier could therefore dispose of such land without consulting his kinship group.

But the sale of land, land litigation and land tenancy were uncommon in pre-colonial Machakos. Indeed, it was a common practice for older sons to move out into the weu, thereby leaving the youngest son to look after their parents and inherit the family's farmlands (ng'undu). Except for some particularly rich patches of land, such as perpetually wet valleys (syanda sing. kyanda), land was rarely sold. Where sale of land did occur, a goat or two and beer were given in exchange. Similarly, the desire to stay among friends or relatives rather than go off to a distant and dangerous weu sometimes led to a form of tenancy. In such a case, an individual was allowed by another to reside on a piece of land temporarily (Penwill, 1951:48).

Although land had become a subject of dispute between the Akamba and the Maasai by the early nineteenth century, land accumulation at the individual level did not become necessary until the colonial period. As Gold (1985:182–83) notes, there were limits to the amount of land one man could control in nineteenth-century Kenya. Obstacles such as low level technology, scarcity of labour and a limited market for food-stuffs militated
against land accumulation by individuals. Moreover, livestock was the chief form of accumulation and grazing land was owned communally by the members of a utui. Consequently, land had no exchange value and was not viewed as a scarce resource. Its accumulation by individuals could therefore serve no purpose.

The fact that pre-colonial Kamba society was a land colonising one explains many of its features such as mobility, neighbourly co-operation, democracy and egalitarianism. At least up to the time of colonial rule, the Akamba were still expanding; "they broke new ground, formed new motui and ivalo, and made new social contacts" (Munro, 1975:16). Relative abundance of land therefore tended to counteract tendencies towards social differentiation in pre-colonial Machakos.

2:2:2 Crop Production

According to Jackson (1976:197), the first Kamba settlers in Mbooni practised a form of agriculture which closely approximated shifting cultivation. The practice did not require high labour input as land for growing crops was prepared by burning a section of the forest. Moreover, the only instrument of cultivation was the digging-stick. However, the settlers were able to raise crops such as yams, potatoes, dilicho beans and bananas. On the whole, the system of agriculture was rudimentary as the Akamba were at the time more committed to pastoralism and hunting than to crop culture.
However, by the early eighteenth century shifting cultivation began to give way to terrace cultivation or irrigation agriculture in some parts of Mbooni. Thus, shifting cultivation continued in the drier environments while terrace cultivation gained popularity in the western slopes of Mbooni. In the later zone, "Streams in the hills were dammed up to form large ponds, at the outlets of which Kamba villages built furrows or ditches to transport water" (Jackson, 1976:198). These irrigation works required a lot of labour power and with them arose temporary coalitions of labouring units in individual kin-groups within villages as well as across villages in a given area. In sum, the population pressure which led to expansion of the Akamba from Mbooni from the early eighteenth century onwards also resulted in intensive agriculture in Mbooni itself.

The dispersal of the Akamba from Mbooni Hills in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries further diversified their agriculture as they came to inhabit a wider variety of environments. Although shifting cultivation continued to be the dominant form of crop production right into the twentieth century, the variety of crops increased with time. Thus, on the eve of colonial rule, the Akamba produced a variety of cereals, legumes, tubers, vegetables and fruits in a variety of ways. For example, in the early 1890s, Major J.R.L. Macdonald observed the following about Kibwezi:

The people live in scattered bush villages on the banks of Kibwezi and Kikumbuliu streams; they cultivate their land to a very fair extent,
and in favourable seasons produce a large supply of food for passing caravans ... (Macdonald, 1973:34).

Another European traveller, Captain F.D. Lugard, who passed through Kilungu in 1889, recorded in his diary:

On every side were herds of cattle and goats and fields of cultivation. The sugar cane is grown here, and fairly large, also cassava (mahogo), mapira (mtama), virombo (mahindi), maheje [sic] Bananas, kundi [sic] sweet potatoes, pojo, Dhal, pumpkins (mammonje), wimbi, and castor-oil (Perham and Bull, 1959:141).

When he reached the western side of Iveti Hills he recorded:

The plain in the dry weather looks parched and arid, but where it is intersected by mountain rills the bananas and crops grow luxuriantly. Here, for the first time in Africa, I saw a system of irrigation channels, most cleverly and effectively planned (Lugard, 1893:283).

In short, Kamba agriculture in the late nineteenth century was fairly diverse.

Among the cereals, finger millet and bulrush millet were the most important in Kamba agriculture. Unlike maize and sorghum, which are easily destroyed by weevils, millets could be stored for as long as three years, or even longer. Moreover, the relative low moisture demand of millets, and their short growing period (Table 3), made them suitable for the uncertain weather conditions of Machakos District.

It is not clear when each of these cereals was introduced
into Kamba agriculture, but the role played by finger millet in Kamba rituals suggests that it is among the earliest crops adopted. It is also possible that maize was first introduced to the Machakos area by coastal traders sometime around 1860 (Miracle, 1966:99). However, its cultivation did not spread far from the areas along the trade routes until the colonial period (Map 4). Indeed, people in the region east of Mbooni Hills told this researcher that maize and 'modern' beans are relatively new crops, and were initially grown on the sites of former homesteads (maanzoni sing. ianzoni). Such areas had the necessary fertility due to accumulated animal manure (Mbuva; Mbuvi; Nthiani, O.I. 1990). Similarly, most of those interviewed in this research asserted that bulrush millet was the chief buffer against famine in the Machakos region.

The major legumes were cow peas, pigeon peas and indigenous beans (nzavi/mbumbu). Each of these legumes has characteristics which made it special in the agricultural system. For example, ndamba cow peas and pigeon peas are perennial crops and served as insurance crops in case the second rains ('long rains') were not sufficient to enable other crops to mature. Another advantage of cow peas is that the leaves could be used as a vegetable just two weeks after planting.

Tubers such as cassava, sweet potatoes and arrowroots were mainly grown in the hills although the first two were also grown in the lowlands. These became handy during locust invasions or when cereals failed due to drought. Indeed, sweet
**Table 3: 'KAMBA' CROPS AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kikamba Name</th>
<th>Kiswahili</th>
<th>Length of Time Between Sowing and Reaping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nzuu</td>
<td>Mbaazi Cajanus Indicus</td>
<td>11 months (1 crop in a year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuvya</td>
<td>Mtama Holcus Sorghum</td>
<td>4 months (2 crops in a year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbemba</td>
<td>Mahindi Zea Mays</td>
<td>4 months (2 crops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mwee</td>
<td>Mawele</td>
<td>3 months (2 crops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uimbi</td>
<td>Wimbi Eleusine Coracana</td>
<td>3 months (2 crops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiwa</td>
<td>Miwa Sugar-cane</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makwasi</td>
<td>Viazi Sweet Potatoes</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mboso</td>
<td>Maharagwe Beans</td>
<td>2 months (2 crops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manga</td>
<td>Muhogo Manioc</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbumbu</td>
<td>Fiwi Beans</td>
<td>3 months (2 crops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malenge</td>
<td>Maboga Pumpkins</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nthooko</td>
<td>Kunde Big beans</td>
<td>3 months (2 crops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maiu</td>
<td>Ndizi Bananas</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongu</td>
<td>Mayungwa Colocasia edulis</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndulia</td>
<td>Not known Red beans</td>
<td>3 months (2 crops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngina</td>
<td>Pojo Pulse(dhall)</td>
<td>3 months (2 crops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kikuu</td>
<td>Buyu Calabash</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Potatoes were grown in damp, sandy river-beds and along streams when a crop failure seemed imminent (Nyange, O.I. 1990). Similarly, pumpkins and **mongu** (an indigenous squash) added variety to the diet and also delayed the use of stored grains.
These two vegetables could not be stored for long and were therefore eaten during the harvest season or shortly afterwards. All in all, the diverse ecology occupied by the Akamba in the late nineteenth century provided them with a wide variety of crops (Table 3).

Except in the few areas where irrigation of crops such as sugar-cane, bananas and arrowroots was possible, Kamba agriculture in the late nineteenth century was basically rain-fed agriculture. Consequently, the techniques of shifting cultivation and inter-cropping were used in order to maximise yields from scarce labour and moisture. Describing this type of agriculture in the dry southern parts of Machakos District where annual average rainfall is less than 635 mm, Porter (1972:36) wrote:

The Mkamba here uses huge quantities of land on shifting cultivation basis. Land is owned, but not sold or inherited. Who would want his father’s land? It is all used up and worthless. New bush is there for the taking. A multitude of crops, many of them quick-maturing, hardy and drought resistant, is sown in what appears to have been a fit of temporary insanity. Seed are all thrown together and worked into large dryland clearings that are virtually unmappable. Here is a list of crops from one field: maize, beans, cow peas, groundnuts, red millet, sorghum, castor, bulrush millet, cassava, pumpkins, calabashes, and pigeon peas. Six kinds of millet are grown here .... Care is taken to plant before or with the rains; indeed the second planting is done amongst standing unharvested crops from the grass rains [short rains].

According to Richards (1984:27), inter-cropping is "one of the greatest glories of African science", and has
numerous advantages. First, the dense vegetative cover the crops produce reduces the exposure of soil to erosive rainfall. Second, the vegetative cover smothers weeds and therefore reduces the burden of weeding. Third, available soil moisture and nutrients are maximised since different crops have different requirements and roots at different depths. Fourth, crop failure due to drought is minimised as farmers mix varieties and species of crops with different speeds of maturation and moisture requirements. Lastly, the mixture of different species of plants minimises the spread of pests and diseases (see De Wilde, 1967:88). In other words, pre-colonial Kamba communities, like most pre-colonial African societies, had a fair grasp of their environment due to their long association with the environment. It is the collapse of this aspect of traditional African agriculture under colonialism which Norman Humphrey, a senior Agricultural Officer in Kenya in the 1940s, lamented when he said:

Had the death of shifting cultivation been accompanied by the birth of a newer and better farming, we could have rejoiced unfeignedly but circumstances rendered that impossible (KNA/DC/MKS 2/18/1:165).

In general, pre-colonial Kamba agriculture was organised around the problem of risk. Perennial crops such as pigeon peas, ndamba peas, pumpkins, mongu (squash) and gourds were planted during the short rains in November. It was also during

3. Pre-colonial African societies chose their production systems on the basis of environmental perception. This 'folk science is called ethnoscience or enthnogeography (Sindiga, 1981: ch. 2; Watts, 1983).
this season that the bulk of the sorghum, bulrush and finger millet crops were grown. This ensured that the perennial crops survived the dry season in January and February, and produced a harvest after the long rains, while the millets avoided the cloudy and misty weather in June and July. Sometimes the sorghum planted in November was ratooned in January so as to produce a second crop in May. Failure of the short rains therefore had far-reaching implications for this was the more important of the two rainy seasons.

Rodney's (1976:254) observation that labour was the factor which was the very buttress of traditional African societies is quite true of pre-colonial Machakos. Indeed, pre-colonial Kamba society fits the description of a moral economy. According to Watts (1983:248), a moral economy is characterised by, among other things, risk aversion in agriculture ('safety first' ethic) and a tendency towards mutual support ('the norm of reciprocity'). Thus, through a variety of mechanisms, the pre-colonial Akamba arranged social life to facilitate production.

One such mechanism was labour reciprocity within the utui. This ensured that labour was available during critical periods in the production process, such as when weeding and thrashing were being done. As already mentioned, labour reciprocity within lineages and motui started in the eighteenth century when some communities in Mbooni began to intensify

4. To ratoon a crop is to prune it in such a way that the old plants regenerate and produce a new crop.
their agriculture through irrigation. By the late nineteenth century, therefore, labour reciprocity was a characteristic feature of Kamba agriculture.

Communal work-groups (*myethya* sing. *mwethya*) were organised in the *utui* around gender or age depending on the particular task being performed. For example, men cleared and prepared land for cultivation and constructed food stores, while women weeded, harvested and prepared food for storage. However, the division of labour was not always clearly marked; sometimes different age-groups of both sexes met to perform the same task. This was common with youth work-groups. Indeed, it was during such work that one could identify a prospective husband or wife for industry in agriculture was a vital quality looked for in prospective marriage partners (*Nthiwa*; *Mukumbu*; *Nzuma*, O.I. 1990).

On the whole, communal work was a joyful activity. In the 1910s, Lindblom described a typical girls' work-group as follows:

The fields present an animated aspect, often with a dozen girls in the same field, chattering and singing as they work. If there are no men about, they take their clothes off and toil away to their hearts' content. They go forward over the field in a row, like soldiers in a firing-line, and in that way no weeds escape them (Lindblom, 1920:503-04).

Youth work-groups performed various agricultural tasks for the families of their members in turns, and were governed
by strict rules and regulations. For example, a youth group could ostracise an errant member by placing a curse on any of its members who would associate with the offender. Ideologically, the consequences of such ostracism could, for example, cause a girl to fail to get a husband or become barren if she eventually married (Lindblom, 1920:184). At the practical level, the cursed member became an outcast among his age-mates and his family lost in terms of labour reciprocity. Consequently, the offender had to seek redress through his parents and pay a prescribed fine to the group.

To ensure reproduction of labour through recreation, as well as to minimise social conflict, the youth were allowed to meet for evening dances at the village recreation ground (kituto). However, such dances were subject to strict rules and regulations and any misbehaviour could elicit a curse from the elders (Masika, O.I. 1990). In that sense, elders had a firm control over the youth, the age-group that provided most labour in the pre-colonial Kamba society.

Before the advent of christianity, farm work among the Akamba was regulated by a set of rituals and customs. Communal (utui-based) rites were observed before planting and harvesting, and during other important events in the agricultural calendar (Mutea; Kioko; Mutiso, O.I. 1990). Before the onset of the rains parties of men went to the weu to fetch the hardwood from

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5. The Kamba have a saying: "Kikuyu kuisawa mwanake", which translates to: "The youth is the most (agriculturally) dependable age-grade in Kikuyuland". This spurred Kamba youth to work hard.
which digging-sticks were made. Similarly, before the harvest work-groups went to the weu to fetch wood for construction of stores. In short, the agricultural calendar was organised communally through religious and other communal practices, although the farms and produce were owned individually. This ensured that most households carried out agricultural activities at the right time.

The common agricultural tool in pre-colonial Ukambani was the digging-stick. For men, it was a 1.8 to 2.7 m beam of wood (nthii) which was used for breaking the ground for a new farm. For women, it was a 1.0 to 1.8 m stick (muo) which was used for breaking the sods after the men had dug up the land. The muo was also used for weeding. However, digging was not always necessary for well-vegetated land was ready for sowing crops after the vegetation was burned down. The loose soil and ashes provided a suitable medium for sowing crops (Kanyau; Mwania, O.I. 1990).

At the household level, labour organisation was vital for the household's self-reproduction. Consequently, the chain of authority extended from the male head of the household through his wives, in order of seniority, through the eldest child to the youngest. Indeed, a married son did not set up his own homestead, and therefore own property until his first child was circumcised (at about the age of twelve years). Until then his labour, his wife's and that of their children
helped to reproduce the extended family (Nthiwa; Mukumbu, O.I. 1990). Lindblom summarises the authority of the head of the household as follows:

The mutumia, the paterfamilias, is the head of the family. He is the possessor [sic] of everything, and if a married son is living at home, he is considered to own even the latter's wife (Lindblom, 1920:446).

A mother had similar authority over her children and daughters-in-law. On the whole, parental authority rested on the ideology of parental curse and blessings. A parental curse was believed to be so potent that it ran through generations of the family of the person so cursed. Similarly, parental blessing was believed to bring prosperity to the person for whom it was invoked. In practice, parental authority carried the responsibility of ensuring the reproduction of the family. For example, the father (or the lineage) was responsible for acquiring a first wife for each son. Sometimes the livestock for the sons' dowry was acquired through dowry payments for their sisters. Therefore, family elders ensured both the material and biological reproduction of their lineages through what Sheriff (1985:9) calls "their control over the means of production, cattle and procreating women" (see also Meillassoux, 1973). Indeed, Munro (1975:26-27) thinks that increase in Kamba raiding activities in the late nineteenth century was partly due to a desire on the part of the Akamba to acquire cattle and women. Watt (1912:223), who was living in Machakos in the early 1890s, records that the Akamba "raided the great Masai clan, and carried off, not only their cattle, but also in many instances
Given the unpredictable rain pattern in most of Machakos District, the Akamba stored grains in large quantities. As recent as 1909 the District Commissioner observed:

Each native has 3 or 4 grain huts.... Sometimes a kind of platform is built under the roof of the dwelling House where grain is stored. As a rule natives of Ulu keep about 2 rains supply in hand over and above seed (KNA/DC/MKS 1/1/3:44).

Thus, food grain was stored in large wicker baskets (siinga sl. kiinga) while seed grain was placed above the fire place so that it became sooty and unattractive to weevils. Similarly, the wicker baskets were properly plastered and sealed with cow-dung to keep off weevils.

However, periods of food shortage were not uncommon. During food shortages, enterprising households offered food in exchange for goats. For example, in 1908, a year of scarcity, a colonial administrator noted that people in areas which had no food were buying it "in other parts of the district from 3 to 4 loads for a goat" (KNA/DC/MKS 1/1/1:7). In turn, goats were exchanged for cattle, which was the highest form of investment in pre-colonial Kamba society.

Livestock

Cattle was the highest form of saving in the Kamba

6. One 'load' is the equivalent of 60 pounds (27.3kg).
economy and served social, economic, political and subsistence needs. At the subsistence level, cattle provided milk, and occasionally blood and meat. Cattle was especially significant during periods of food scarcity when blood for food was drawn from them, or, in case of severe famine, driven to Kikuyuland to be exchanged with grain.

Cattle also served as an insurance against crop failure because seasons of low rainfall did not always result in scarcity of pasture. Moreover, in times of drought cattle recovered fast after the onset of rains and provided milk and blood long before any crops could provide food. Even in the 1940s, when the government was still asking the Akamba to reduce their herds in spite of the frequency of food shortages, the Agricultural Officer observed that milk and the leaves of cow peas came to the people’s help the earliest (KNA/DC/MKS 8/4:166).

Besides cattle, the Akamba also kept large flocks of goats and sheep, and chicken. These were by and large the chief forms of currency besides serving subsistence, ritual and even 'medicinal' purposes. Indeed, European travellers who passed through Ukambani in the late nineteenth century spoke glowingly of Kamba herds. In 1889, for example, Lugard (1893:261) recorded:

Here among the Ulu mountains the population was dense, and cultivation extended in every direction .... The excellent mountain grass was cropped short by the flocks and herds of the natives. The plague [rinderpest] had not
yet made its terrible visitation, and single herds of cattle numbered perhaps not less than 1,000 head.

In the early 1890s, Major J.R.L. Macdonald observed that the people of Kibwezi owned considerable flocks of sheep and goats but comparatively few cattle. He attributed this to Maasai presence in the surrounding area. But the actual reason may have been tsetse fly infestation of the area for even Muka people bordered the Maasai but kept large herds of cattle (Macdonald 1973:34-36).

The significance of livestock in the Kamba social system was well expressed in social institutions. For example, livestock was an important ingredient of bride-wealth. Thus, individuals used livestock to expand their lineages and to create allies or clients. For example, cattle loans enabled the rich to insure their herds against disease epidemics by sending parts of the herd to diverse places. Similarly, the poor settled around a wealthy stock-owner so that they could obtain milk from his compound (Musembi, O.I. 1990). In return they helped him with farm-work and in other activities.

However, expansion of one's lineage was the most common practice. As human and animal population in a utui increased, and grazing became scarce, individuals split their herds so that one part was taken to an outpost while the other part remained in the utui. Gradually the cattle-post was transformed into farmland by stationing one of a man's wives,
usually the youngest, at the cattle-post to establish a permanent homestead with cultivated fields. Increase in livestock wealth therefore led into acquisition of more wives, which in turn meant acquisition of more livestock and therefore a claim to more land through the establishment of cattle-posts and their gradual transformation to farmlands. This practice not only insured an individual's livestock against diseases, but also insured the extended family against food shortages as a local crop failure could be overcome by acquiring food-stuffs from another of the family's homesteads elsewhere (Mbuva; Nguta, 0.I. 1990).

As already indicated, raiding for livestock and women, as well as for territorial expansion of 'Kambaland', seems to have been part of pre-colonial Kamba system of production. In fact, the institution of circumcision was used to inculcate in the minds of male initiates the sanctity of raiding (Manda; Musembi, 0.I. 1990). But raiding was not only directed towards other ethnic groups such as the Maasai and the Kikuyu, it was also an intra-Kamba affair. For example, the Akamba of eastern Machakos raided those of Kitui while Kilungu Akamba raided other Machakos Akamba (Munro, 1975:16). However, inter-ethnic raids remained small-scale surprise attacks until the 1880s and 1890s when the Akamba intensified their raids on the Maasai and the Kikuyu. This was encouraged by factors such as a decline in Maasai military power due to human and animal epidemics, and succession disputes; a demand for cattle created by Swahili traders and which the Machakos Akamba endeavoured to
supply; and the emergence of centralising figures among the Akamba. These so-called New Men sought to build bases outside the Kamba political system by using wealth acquired from the trade with the coast to enlarge their lineages and clientele.

2:2:4 **Trade**

The other aspects of pre-colonial Kamba system of production were trade, hunting, bee-keeping and a wide variety of crafts. To a large extent, all these activities helped to augment the subsistence base of the society. More importantly, hunting, bee-keeping and traditional crafts enhanced Kamba trading activities. Consequently, trade had a significant impact on the Kamba society from its arrival in Mbooni to the time of British intervention (see Cummings, 1975; Lamphear, 1970).

According to Jackson (1976:201), the Akamba inhabited a variety of ecologies in Mbooni, and therefore had access to a wide range of resources. As a result, trade developed between and within Kamba settlements in Mbooni. The trade items included pottery, dyes, agricultural tools and hunting weapons. "Exchanging surpluses of food-stuffs accounted for another share of it" (ibid).

Dispersal from Mbooni in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries further extended intra-Kamba trade, especially between lowland and highland communities. Lowlanders supplied highlanders with pigeon peas, grains and gourds in exchange for pottery,
tubers and sugar-cane. This trade, which was mainly in the form of gift-exchange, was locally called kuthuua. However, in times of acute food shortages, the Akamba sought food in Kikuyuland where they obtained it in exchange with craft products such as arrows, arrow poison, snuff containers, ivory armlets, brass chains, etc.

To a large extent, both the intra-Kamba trade and the regional trade between the Akamba and the Mount Kenya peoples satisfied complementary needs of the communities involved. The trade satisfied needs for food, livestock and livestock products, implements for agriculture and warfare, and luxury items. On the whole, the trade was sporadic, irregular and seasonal. It was mainly a part-time activity and was therefore most intense during the dry season, when farm activity was lowest and during famines (Ndege, 1990: 123-24; Muriuki 1974: 107-08). Although the trade was primarily geared towards meeting food consumption and production strategies of households, it did lead to accumulation of wealth, especially livestock. Such livestock was converted to productive labour through acquisition of procreative women. On the other hand, livestock could be easily converted into grain whenever the need arose. In sum, intra- and inter-community trade helped to reproduce the Kamba social system.

From about 1830, the local and regional trade in eastern Kenya was progressively drawn into international commerce through the long-distance trade between the coast and
the interior. In this trade, the Akamba acted as middlemen between the Mount Kenya region and the coast, obtaining ivory from the interior in exchange for coastal goods such as beads, cowrie shells, copper wire, etc. However, by mid-nineteenth century, Kamba pre-eminence in the trade began to wane as both the Mount Kenya peoples and the coastal traders sought to trade directly with each other. This was due to a number of factors. First, the two groups wanted to increase their profits in the trade by eliminating the Kamba middlemen. Second, demand for ivory in the United States of America and Europe was increasing faster than could be supplied from the seasonal and irregular supplies from the interior of East Africa. Consequently, the coastal traders sought to regulate the supply by obtaining ivory from the source areas. Third, demand for slave labour in Zanzibar, Pemba and the Kenya Coast prompted coastal traders to move into the interior to look for slaves (Ndege, 1990:124).

Unlike the Kitui area, which was the centre of the trade with the coast, the Machakos area remained a commercial backwater until Swahili-Arab caravans began to traverse the area in big numbers in the 1870s. This at once made Machakos an area for supplying caravans with food, porters, cattle and ivory. Supply bases emerged along the trade routes (Map 4) from Kibwezi in the south to Masaku's (later Machakos) in the north.

Participation in this trade had a number of consequences on the Kamba society. First, the trade was in every sense unequal; it favoured the foreigners at the expense of the Akamba.
Thus, Kamba labour (porters), food and wealth (cattle) were exchanged for luxury items such as beads, shells and cloth. Unlike the local and regional trade, the trade with the coastal merchants did not meet the people's food consumption and production strategies; instead, the trade drew resources out of the Kamba economy. Lugard's experience in Kibwezi in 1889 is typical of the period. He recorded:

Arrived in camp we fire a couple of shots as signals; soon the Wakamba, men and women, begin to stream in with baskets or bags (beautifully woven of nkonge [sic] fibre) full of grain or flour (wimbi and mtama), with potatoes and fowls, and perhaps, a pot or two of honey .... After much haggling a standard is fixed, a small basket, holding perhaps two large cups of flour, is exchanged for a 'string' (about a foot long) of small beads (Lugard, 1893:274).

As the nineteenth century wore on, the number and size of caravans increased. Initially, it was the Swahili-Arab traders and their retinues of porters and slaves; then from 1889, caravans organised by the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEA) and other European interest groups began to traverse the Machakos area. All these groups were supplied with food by the ornament-craving Wakamba. No wonder, after the Muvunga Famine (1898-99) the Watts could not get customers for their beads at Ngelani. The people had discovered that they had been cheated out of their food by exchanging it with 'worthless' ornaments. Indeed, Watt writes:

During the previous years beads and wire alone were in request, and we had just received a large
supplied of these before the dearth came, and our storeroom was well stocked with the usual varieties. These lay there for two years unsought by a single native (Watt, 1912:313).

The trade also affected relationships between the Akamba and their neighbours. The demand for cattle and slaves created by the coastal traders prompted the Akamba to intensify their raiding activities on the Maasai and the Kikuyu (Munro, 1975:17-19; Muriuki, 1974:95). Some of the livestock and women captured in the raids helped to swell Kamba lineages while the rest were sold off to coastal traders. On the whole, the raids had negative effects on peaceful trade between the Akamba and the Kikuyu, a trade on which the former were very much dependent in times of food shortage.

Within the Kamba society, the trade with the coast intensified enmity between different sections of the community (Cummings, 1975:214). Before the coming of the Swahili and Arab traders, the community was fragmented in small utui groups. However, the coastal trade helped coalesce the community into ivalo sections and enhanced the power of the athiani (war leaders).

Traditionally, war leaders obtained sanction from the elders before mobilising warriors (anake) in their ivalo for raids. But when the trade with the coast started, the athiani began to mobilise warriors for cattle raids, elephant hunts or porterage in a bid to supply the needs of the coastal traders.
This gradually made the athiani wealthy individuals with large followings in their ivalo. Consequently, ivalo, rather than motui, became the foci of social organisation. As there were no councils for ivalo, the new form of organisation enhanced the power of athiani in relation to that of utui councils.

The new trade also benefited some ivalo more than others. For example, the ivalo along the trade routes benefited more from the trade than those located far from the routes. This generated jealousy and strife between different ivalo under the leadership of individual athiani. The overall result was the development of larger but antagonistic 'polities' among the Akamba society. This is the situation the British found when they came, a situation they took advantage of to institute the colonial state. This way the trade initiated structures on which the process of articulation between the capitalist mode of production and the traditional Kamba economy was generated and strengthened.

The athiani were not the only group which benefited from the Swahili-Arab infiltration. In fact, they needed the services of seers in their raiding activities. Seers like Masaku and Syokimau foretold the success of raids in return for a share of the booty. Being prominent people in their ivalo, seers also accorded hospitality to passing caravans for a fee. They also acted as trade brokers by playing the role of middlemen in the trade between the Akamba and the coastal traders.
Other individuals along the trade routes joined by mobilising *anak* as porters for a commission from the traders (Munro, 1975: 28). The process of articulation was therefore initiated by the interaction between the merchant capital of the coastal traders on the one hand and the Kamba traditional economy on the other.

Evidently, nineteenth-century Machakos was a favourite stop-over for Arab-Swahili traders on their journeys between the coast and the interior of Kenya. These agents of merchant capital made friends with prominent Akamba who guaranteed them security and supplied them with food and porters in return for gifts of clothes and bungles. However, the Swahili and Arabs were unscrupulous traders. Sometimes they turned their Kamba porters into slaves and even encouraged intra- and inter-community raids as a means of acquiring slaves (Somba, 1979:34-35). Therefore the trade had unsettling effects on the societies of eastern Kenya. On the whole, the Arab-Swahili merchants were the harbinger of the colonial state in the articulation process.

By way of conclusion, it is important to underscore the fact that irregularity of weather conditions is a distinguishing feature of Machakos District. The environmental factor is therefore important when analysing the impact of colonialism on the Kamba system of production. Through the process of articulation, the society's adaptation to environmental risks was greatly reduced. Kamba ethnoscience and social organisation, which had hitherto given the society a fair margin of security against environmental hazards, became obsolete in the face of
new pressures. For example, the pre-colonial society combined crop production and pastoralism in a set of agro-ecological strategies which assured it of a wide range of subsistence products. Similarly, social strategies such as labour reciprocity, hierarchical organisation within households, trade, methods of food storage, etc had heretofore helped to reproduce the Kamba society. In extreme situations (as was the case in the late 1890s) the society pawned women and children for food among the Mount Kenya peoples, or raided other communities for livestock.

On the whole, the pre-colonial Kamba system of production may be described as a natural economy (see Berstein, 1977:61). This involved a cycle of household production characterised by a simple integration of production and consumption within households (see Bryceson, 1980:262). Thus, nineteenth-century Kamba households were generally engaged in the production of use-values rather than exchange-values. But in the subsequent period, colonial political economy emphasised production of the latter. From the late nineteenth century, therefore, the policies of the colonial state gradually undermined the operations of the Kamba economy. The rest of this study therefore examines agrarian crises among the Akamba as the society changed under the influence of colonial capitalism.

7. Although Muriuki (1974:85) claims that pawning of women and children among Mount Kenya communities was a normal practice, other evidence shows that it was laden with conflict (KNA/DC/NYI 3/10).

8. Capitalism was initially in the form of merchant capital of the Swahili-Arab traders, but from 1889 imperialist expansion began to prepare the ground for colonial capitalism.
International commerce did not have a significant impact on the Akamba of Machakos until the 1870s when the area became a major supply base for Arab and Swahili caravans. Even then the impact of commercial capitalism on the society remained small until the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEA) came on the scene in 1889. The company was not just a commercial enterprise, it was also an instrument of British imperialism. The company's arrival therefore heralded the penetration of Kenyan economies by colonial capitalism. Henceforth, capitalist penetration became linked with political penetration and indigenous systems of production were progressively relocated to suit the interests of colonial capitalism. This was the plight of the traditional Kamba economy.

As Gutkind et al (1978: 11) say, "the spread of capitalism, even to a peripheral zone, detaches man from his product, from his habitual environment, and from his right to dispose his labour power and his agricultural goods on his own right". That was the process initiated in Kenya by the IBEA and intensified by the colonial state during the 1895-1923 period. This initial phase of colonialism in Kenya not only witnessed the entrenchment of foreign rule but also the progressive articulation of indigenous modes of production with the capitalist mode of production. By and large, the opening up of indigenous modes of production to Western capitalism was a concomitant of the establishment of the colonial state in Kenya.
The turning-point of the articulation process in the country was the colonial state's decision to promote a settler economy. Indeed, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, resource mobilisation and allocation were geared almost exclusively to this goal. Through a process of primitive accumulation, the state appropriated African land, confiscated livestock, introduced taxation and institutionalised forced labour on behalf of the settlers. Public resources were also used to prop the settler sector by providing it with transport, marketing facilities and finance (Zeleza, 1989a:39). In sum, the state served as a medium for transferring the means of production from the African sector to the European sector during this formative period of the colonial social formation.

This chapter looks into the incorporation of the Akamba into the emerging colonial social formation prior to 1924. The various forms which the incorporation took, and the impact it had on the Kamba system of production and reproduction are analysed.

3:1 'Muvunga' Famine, 1898-99

The 1889-1899 decade marks an important transitional period in the history of the Machakos Akamba. The coming of the British in 1889, and a series of disasters in the 1890s, combined to chart a new path in the development of the Kamba society. Within that decade, the formerly fragmented but autonomous society lost its political and, to a large extent,
economic independence to a foreign power against a background of calamities. Indeed, many societies in East and Central Africa were affected in a similar manner (see Kjekshus, 1977; Ofcansky, 1981).

Central to the origins of the Muvunga Famine were European activities in Africa in general, and in Machakos in particular. A case in point is the outbreak of rinderpest in the East and Central African region in 1890-91. The disease spread into the region from two possible source areas. Either it came from Somalia, where it was introduced by infected cattle imported from India and Aden by the Italian Army for its Ethiopian campaign of 1889; or it came from Egypt, where contaminated cattle were imported by the British Army for the Nile Valley campaign of 1884-85 (Kjekshus, 1977:127; Ofcansky, 1981:31). Whichever was the source area, the disease undermined the economies of many societies. For example, F.D. Lugard who traversed Maasailand and Ukambani in late 1890 recorded:

Never before in the memory of man, or by voice of tradition, have the cattle died in such vast numbers (Quoted in Kuczynski, 1949:195).

The epidemic resulted in a severe famine among pastoralists (Ibid). The heavy livestock mortality may have been responsible for the intense inter-community raiding Europeans witnessed in East Africa in the 1890s. In a bid to
m-build their herds, East African communities intensified raids against one another and the incoming Europeans stepped into 'pacify' them. In the process, the new-comers organised punitive expeditions which were nothing but glorified raids.

"[The] Europeans and their allies drove off the enemy, fired their villages, looted their crops and seized their cattle and goats" (Sorrenson, 1968:271). As shown below, several such expeditions were sent against different sections of the Akamba with disastrous effects.

British colonial activities among the Akamba of Machakos started in January 1889 when Fredrick Jackson established an IBEA post at Nzaui. In the following August, Jackson established another post at Kaani in the Iveti Hills (Map 4) after signing a treaty with a local trade-broker, Mbole wa Mathambyo. The treaty reads in part:

Let it be known to all whom it may concern that Mbooli [sic] Chief [sic] of Ivati [sic], Ukambani has placed himself and all his Territories, countries, peoples and subjects under the protection, rule and Government of the IBEA co., and has ceded to the said Co. all his sovereign rights and rights of government ... (KNA/DC/ MKS 4/2:1).

Needless to say, Mbole was not a chief, and therefore had neither territories nor people to place under the company's protection. He probably mistook the treaty for a trade agreement between the new-comers and himself. All the same, the treaty became the legal basis for European intervention
Indeed, Mbole undertook to fly the company's flag at Kaani.

However, the bastion of European colonialism in Ukambani was established at Masaku's (Machakos) in March 1890. Following a peace treaty with the chief trade-broker in the area (Nzivu wa Mweu), F.D. Lugard of the IBEA went ahead and set up the first company fort in the interior. From here, European rule was progressively extended to the rest of Ukambani in the 1890s (see Maxon, 1980; Munro, 1975).

Kamba trade-brokers eagerly welcomed company officials just as another set of trading partners, but they soon discovered that the company had other designs. Unlike the itinerary Arab-Swahili merchants, company officials had come to stay and could enforce their demands. The first people to discover this were the inhabitants of Iveti. After a series of conflicts with the personnel of the Machakos Fort, Iveti people attacked the fort in 1891. The result was a shocking defeat of Iveti warriors and the burning of huts by the company soldiers. Henceforth, Iveti people not only paid tribute to the company but also joined its military campaigns against other Kamba groups.

The arrival of John Ainsworth as IBEA administrator at Machakos Fort hastened the conquest of Ukambani. Without

1. Masaku himself had died in about 1887 (Munro, 1975:35).
difficulties, Ainsworth not only got the people of Iveti to supply labour for construction work at the fort, but also forced them to contribute food-stuffs for the fort. In 1893, for example, Iveti people donated over 200,000 pounds (19,909 kg) of flour (Munro, 1975:37). However, this contribution was not voluntary.

Stuart Watt, who was living in Ngelani (Map 4) in 1894, wrote:

He [Ainsworth] tells Wazungu [Europeans] that the people give him tons of flour to help him in the country but it is brought under the most terrible threats of burning houses and fighting and violence so that the people are living in continual dread and fear of him (Quoted in Maxon, 1980:35).

In other words, the under-capitalised company used its superior military power to exact tribute from the people living around the fort. As the company extended its rule in the 1890s, payment of food tribute was imposed on the rest of Machakos (Maingi; Muindi, O.I. 1990).

Besides the fear of the company's military strength in their area, Iveti people also co-operated with the new-comers so that they could be left alone to trade with passing caravans. In fact, trade-brokers, unlike athiani (war leaders) of the eastern and northern regions; were generally well disposed towards the company (Munro, 1975:39). Moreover, friendly relations with company officials gave Iveti people a measure of security against Maasai raids. Indeed, in 1894, Ainsworth trained and armed a 60-man Iveti militia to guard the western frontier from Maasai raids. However, by the end of 1895, Maasai raids had ceased due to civil war among the Maasai themselves. Subsequently, Ainsworth turned his Kamba militia against other Kamba groups.

Ainsworth's 'punitive' expeditions in Ukambani were
based on his commitment to end "Kamba 'domestic slave trade': the position of Maasai and Kikuyu women and children taken in war or purchased from the Kikuyu" (Munro, 1975:39). In 1893, Ainsworth persuaded the Iveti Akamba to yield their adopted members, and those who wished to return to their communities were allowed to do so. However, his attempts to force the people of the northern ivalo to follow Iveti’s example were forcefully resisted by the people under the leadership of two athiani (war leaders), Mwatu wa Ngoma of Mwala and Mwana Muka of Kathome.

This sparked off a series of 'punitive' expeditions against the northern, eastern and southern parts of the district in the 1894-97 period (see Lonsdale, 1989:20). The attacks and counter-attacks greatly weakened the Akamba society and therefore made it vulnerable to ecological hazards. For instance, during one expedition to the northern ivalo in December 1895, "Many villages were burned, [and] over five hundred head of cattle and one thousand goats were taken ..." (Maxon, 1980:52). Six months later, the same section of the Akamba re-asserted its freedom of action by raiding a pro-British village near the Machakos Fort and by blocking the main road to Uganda at Lukenya (Map 4). C.R.W. Lane, the then Assistant District Officer at Machakos, recorded his response as follows:

I led an expedition consisting 150 Swahili and about 800 Maasai and 400 Wakikuyu against Kanjalu [sic], the rebels stronghold. We were again successful and took some 200 head of cattle and 800 goats ... (KNA/PC/Coast 1/1/31:54).

Pre-colonial raids had a self-limiting quality and only
became destructive during severe natural disasters when social control crumbled and survival was threatened (Lonsdale, 1989: 10; Muriuki, 1974:95). On the contrary, 'punitive' expeditions were quite destructive and were obviously not the civilising efforts they were claimed to be (see Munro, 1975:43-46). The use of guns and the purposes of such expeditions made them inherently destructive. First, the expeditions were meant to weaken indigenous economies in order to enforce submission to the foreign power. Second, the conquering power not only needed loot for rewarding its 'allies' but also for financing the budding colonial administration. Even the conquerors questioned the morality of their activities. For example, Charles Eliot, Kenya's Commissioner in 1901-04, said:

The point in our relations with natives which is most open to criticism is our fondness with little wars, generally called punitive expeditions (Quoted in Kuczynski, 1949:199).

That, in a nutshell, is the background against which the Muvunga Famine occurred. The 1890-91 rinderpest, Maasai civil wars, and British intervention in eastern Kenya are some of the factors which interacted to cause social instability in the region. Moreover, there were intermittent locust invasions during 1894-96 which adversely affected the Kikuyu and Akamba alike (Muriuki 1974: 155). There was also the sand-flea (jigger-flea) plague at about the same time. The insects, which arrived in West Africa from Latin America in
about 1872 (Kjekshus, 1977:134), and which had been moving eastwards across the continent, caused a lot of havoc in the Machakos region. Watt recorded the experience of the Ngelani Akamba:

In a short time hundreds of natives were so disabled by the plague of insects that they were unable to walk to their little cultivated patches in the wilds, and many of them lost their toes, while some died from the effects of this terrible plague (Watt, 1912:288).

In short, a multiplicity of factors preceded the occurrence of the famine.

The immediate causes of the famine were equally complex, although they were generally related to British empire-building activities. Apart from poor rains in most of Ukamba Province (Map 2) during 1896-98, intense procurement of food for various imperial activities and a rinderpest epidemic were the other major causes. In his plea for famine relief in April 1899, John Ainsworth, the Sub-Commissioner for Ukamba Province (1895-1906), informed his superiors:

[We] have not had any regular rainy season for about two and a half years, and these natives sold large supplies of their reserved food in 1897 and 1898 to the Uganda Relief Expedition, undoubtedly if it had not been for parting of such a quantity of food to the numerous Caravans and also selling to the natives of KITUI some of their reserved food during the same period, the present state of affairs would not have been nearly as serious, added to the drought and many consequent failures of Crops, came the Cattle Plague, if there had not been the great losses of cattle most of the people, who are
not in a position to do so would have been able to buy their food (KNA/PC/Coast 1/1/45:12).

The first major procurement of food was in late 1896, and was in connection with work on the Uganda Railway at Kibwezi. Following a request from the railway administration, the administrators of Ukamba Province supplied 1,500 men and the food to feed them. In spite of low food supplies in the province at the time, Kikuyuland supplied twenty tons of grain while Ukambani supplied a lesser amount (Curtis, 1986:37). But how this food was acquired is anybody's guess. The railway administration did not provide trade goods for buying the food, and the provincial administration had none. In fact, the provincial administration was operating on loans as Ainsworth recorded in September 1896:

To enable us to buy food supplies and keep things going at the stations the local Wazee [elders] here have arranged to lend us some 300 goats. This will ease matters for about another month (KNA/PC/Coast 1/1/31:100).

Another intense procurement of food was caused by the outbreak of the Sudanese Mutiny in Uganda in 1897. As part of British 'possessions' in East Africa at the time, Ukamba Province was called upon to supply food-stuffs for feeding the Indian troops sent to Uganda to quell the mutiny. According to evidence given to the Kenya Land Commission (1933) by a missionary who was in Kikuyuland at the time of the mutiny, "the Government commandeered the last crop prior to the drought
for the trip to Uganda" (Quoted in Kuczynski, 1949:199).
Indeed, the mutiny (a product of nineteenth-century British imperialism) also caused famine in Busoga and disrupted social life in parts of western Kenya (Nayenga, 1979:156; Aseka, 1989:163).

Besides procurement of food by the government, ordinary caravans also had to be fed. This food was not only exchanged for 'worthless' trinkets but evidence suggests that it was sometimes acquired forcibly. For example, in June 1896, the assistant D.O. at Machakos reported:

[Food] is getting scarce owing to lack of rain and in consequence of the small supply the Swahili [traders] have to go to the villages, and as long as this has to be done there will be quarrels between them and the Wakamba (KNA/PC/Coast 1/1/31:54).

Gregory (1968:82) also cites an incident in Kilungu in the early 1890s where the people tricked his caravan so as to have time "to remove all [food] supplies from the villages into hiding-places in the hills". This was in spite of the fact that the chief trade-broker in the area was obliged in a treaty to supply food to passing IBEA caravans. In short, caravans sometimes used extra-economic means to acquire food.

In spite of the increase in the demand for food in the 1890s, there is no evidence to suggest increased production of food among the Machakos Akamba. Merchant capital does not