

**THE DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTION OF SOAPSTONE INDUSTRY IN
KISII AREA OF KENYA: 1895-2010**

BY

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DECLARATION

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DEDICATION

This research thesis is dedicated to my husband John, my parents, and my children, Bruce, Teresia and Larry for their love, patience, kind heartedness and gentle encouragement which helped me get through this process.

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ABSTRACT

Soapstone carving is one of the oldest traditional industries among Abagusii of Western Kenya. At present it is one of the greatest contributors to economic development of Abagusii of Tabaka area in particular and Kenya in general through tourism. As an industry, it has undergone various changes in both modeling and uses since pre-colonial time to present. Using sustainable Livelihood theory, this study examined the impact of socio-cultural, economic and political factors on the development of soapstone industry since 1895 to 2010. Specifically, this study documented the use of soapstone carving and accounted for various socio-cultural, economic and political factors that have influenced the changes in their use, determined the effects of market and political forces on soapstone industry and documented how the carving industry has impacted on the culture of the local community. Data for this study was collected from seventy respondents through in depth conversational interviews using interview schedule on various themes. The respondents were selected using snowball sampling technique. Augmentative data was also obtained from key informant interviews and focused group discussion. Data for this study was analyzed qualitatively. Findings were corroborated with secondary data from journals, books, written correspondences and News Paper articles. The study found that the use of soapstone items have changed over time from utility purposes to artistic items and commodities of trade due to political, economic or social factors. The introduction of colonial economy changed the production and marketing of soapstone items. The study noted that the introduction of taxes made many people to indulge in soapstone production as a way of meeting colonial tax requirements as well as to get money to purchase western industrial finished products. In the Post- colonial period, the development of soapstone industry was affected by competing political forces among various actors mostly within Gusii community. Also it was found that global economic factors especially economic crisis of 1980s impacted negatively on the soapstone industry. This necessitated soapstone crafters to come up with various strategies to overcome the negative impact of the economic crisis. These strategies either involved individuals coming up with more innovations on soapstone products or diversifying into other economic activities related to soapstone such as forming co-operatives to help them market their products. Others established HIV/AIDS Self Help groups to access donor funding for their business. These strategies have promoted the resilience of the soapstone industry. There is need for the enactment of a draft policy and clear legal framework to protect the soapstone carver from blatant exploitation by unscrupulous middlemen and women, businessmen and investors. This legal frame should be particularly drafted in a main aim of protecting the social and economic interests, innovativeness and creativity of the soapstone carvers. This research was useful in providing relevant information to traditional industries/handicrafts, especially concerning marketing and organization of their production and income generation, as soapstone carving provides gainful employment to large numbers of people in the Kisii region.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AIDS | Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome |
| B C | Before Christ |
| CID | Criminal Investigation Department |
| DO | District Officer |
| HIV | Human Immuno-deficiency Virus |
| ICDC | Industrial and Commercial Development Corporation |
| KSCCS | Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society |
| KSCCS | Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society |
| SAPs | Structural Adjustment Programmes |
| SLA | Sustainable livelihood analysis |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UNCTAD | United Nation Cultural Trade and Development |
| UNCTAD | United Nations Conference on Trade and Development |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| USA | United States of America |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Soap stone refers to soft rock of different colours and can be carved into various shapes.

Art refers to a well finished and designed item with a perceived utility and/or decorative value.

Handicraft refers to articles produced with simple tools or instruments in most cases peddle powered or handled by the craftsman himself or with no tools at all.

Livelihood refers to a person's capabilities, their means of making a living and how they get food, their incomes and their tangible assets.

Sustainable livelihoods refer a person's ways of making a living as well as conserving the environment for future generations. Its goal is to enhance poverty eradication, linking socioeconomic and ecological considerations in a systematic way.

Soapstone Development refers to significant event, occurrence, or change of soapstone industry over the years.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview

This chapter presents the background to the study, study area, statement of the problem, study objectives, hypotheses, theoretical framework, justification of study, literature review and methodology used in collecting data for this work.

1.1 Background to the study

This is a study of the development of the soapstone industry in Tabaka area, Kisii County of Kenya since the beginning of the 20th century. Industry involves the extraction of raw materials and applying processes to them so as to produce finished products which are different in quality or use from the original raw material. Therefore soapstone carving (*Obobachi bwamagena*) as known in Gusii language is an industry which transforms raw soapstone into art work or functional items. Industrial skills and technology are basic requirements in any attempt by human beings to improve their standards of living and socio-economic development. Hence, human beings have always developed skills to harness resources in order to enhance their living conditions and to promote overall socio-economic development. As early as the Stone Age period, humans in different parts of the world engaged in the production of stone tools such as the hand axe, knives and scrapers that were used for various livelihood purposes.¹ In different parts of Africa, these early forms of technologies have improved over the years resulting in better modes of production and economic growth. All technological wonders of today are improvement from these basic tools which were invented by Stone Age human beings.²

In any form of industrial production, human beings interact with the environment as they extract resources from raw materials to process and make products for domestic and other forms of utilities. The extraction and processing of raw materials need skill and knowledge that are developed over time. This research focused on the development of the soapstone industry among the Gusii community in western Kenya covering the period between 1895 and 2010. It specifically looked into the uses of various soapstone sculptures, the factors that influenced the changes in the uses of soapstone, the effects of market forces on soapstone industries, and the impact of carving on the culture of the local community. It also made recommendations on how to improve the soapstone industry in Kisii.

The time span of this study covers the years 1895 to 2010. 1895 has been selected as the beginning point of this research because it marks the imposition of British colonial rule in Kenya. By this time the Gusii people had already settled in their current homeland in Western Kenya, and were engaging in production and trade with their neighbours. It is thus an appropriate point at which to start investigating the development and evolution of indigenous soapstone production as the Gusii people exploited their natural resources, while they interacted and adapted to the new social, economic and political conditions that appeared when the colonialists began administering their homeland.³ Thus the study looks closely at soapstone production among the Gusii during the colonial period, which allows for the understanding of the impacts of colonialism and capitalism on the soapstone industry. The year 2010 has been chosen as the end point of this research in order to provide some coverage of the post-colonial period. This allows for the

assessment of the role of successive independence governments in the development of the soapstone industry in the Gusii community, and current challenges facing the industry.

1.2 Historical Background

Technological development is one of the major ways in which human beings have tried to utilize the environment for the improvement of their standards of living and overall social development. The development of tools in the Stone Age soon led to the development of tools made of other materials, such as bronze and later iron. Initially technology developed through a process of trial and error, but as human beings traveled from one place to another they spread their technological knowledge with them. This is how the knowledge of iron smelting came to be known to various indigenous peoples throughout the world.⁴ Unlike iron smelting, the skill of soapstone carving seems to have developed independently. The two cultures most famous for soapstone carving, the Inuit of Arctic Canada and the Gusii of western Kenya, seem to have developed the skill without knowledge of each other, as there is no anthropological or archaeological evidence to indicate that they were ever in contact with each other before modern times. It seems that both cultures developed this skill through trial and error.⁵

Therefore, although trade is another vehicle of technological transfer, as it encourages meeting of people and exchange of ideas, there is no evidence of trade between the Inuit and the Gusii. Therefore it can be surmised that both communities simply lived in areas with soapstone deposits, and they developed the skills of soapstone carving through experimentation without influencing each other.

The local environments largely determined the forms of technology developed by particular peoples. Therefore no ethnic group could be completely self-sufficient, and so they had to engage in trade to meet all their resource needs. For instance, by 500 B.C. iron smelting was highly developed in Buhaya region, among the Tatoga, Maasai, and the Nyakyusa.⁶ Iron was also a major item of trade obtained from the Pare smelters in Southern Tanzania.⁷ Also, the Fipa exchanged their iron products with their neighbours for food.⁸ Salt was also acquired by burning grass.⁹ The other industrial activity was mat making practiced by the Nyakyusa.¹⁰ Thus, it can be ascertained that pots, cloth, iron, salt and mats were the major commodities of trade in most parts of Tanzania. As the Gusii homeland lies close to the border with Tanzania, traditionally the Gusii traded with ethnic communities from both present-day Kenya and Tanzania.

Ochieng (1974) gives a substantial contribution to the study of the community's indigenous industries. He provides an insight into the various industrial products that the Gusii (Kisii) people used to exchange with their neighbours the Luo, Kipsigis and Maasai. The Kisii produced iron implements such as hoes, axes, spears, arrows, knives and razors. These were especially manufactured by the Kisii clans of Kitutu and North Mugirango. Ornamental iron works like arm rings, leg rings and earrings were also produced in the Kisii community. Iron work was also scattered in other parts of Kisii including Bobasi, Machoge and South Mugirango. Apart from iron work, Ochieng also mentions the manufacturing of soapstone products such as pipes, bowls, and models of animals, snakes, birds and human beings. The Kisii sold the above items to their neighbouring communities in exchange for cattle, salt, hides, ghee, milk and drums.¹¹ An interpretation of Ochieng's findings suggest that soapstone was initially used to produce

items of functional value, such as pipes and bowls, and that later soapstone was carved to make art objects like statues of people and animals, although the art was not produced on a commercial scale.

Another way in which technology develops is through conflict. History is replete with examples of how warring peoples influenced each other, such as the Zulu under Shaka. The Zulu revolutionized warfare by using a short, stabbing spear (*assegai*) instead of the long throwing spears used by their enemies. Soon after this innovation, warfare throughout southern Africa was conducted using stabbing spears.¹² Similarly, once a community entered the Iron Age, it would do its best to keep the secret of iron-working within the community. But iron weapons and blacksmiths could be captured in battle, and they could be forced to reveal the secret.¹³ Once again, it is hard to imagine the skill of soapstone carving spreading in this manner.

Despite communities developing technology from the resources in their immediate surroundings, once societies reached a certain level of development, they could afford to acquire raw materials from distant places. For example, the Ancient Egyptians became highly skilled in handicrafts that involved materials such as copper, precious stones and gold, none of which was obtained locally in Egypt. Therefore, the level of a community's material culture was a function of its level of technology and/or its level of trade. According to Ian Hodder¹⁴ material culture is rich with information on a peoples' way of life. If it is put into the right synthesis and correctly deciphered, it becomes an important source of a people's past. Since soapstone occurs naturally in Kisii, the Gusii people did not need to trade to obtain this raw material. Thus it is apparent that the level of skill exhibited by soapstone carvers indicated a high level of technology among the Gusii. In

the same way, the level of trade and technology among the Ancient Egyptians can be inferred from their material culture. They produced hardened mud-bricks that were used in the construction of magnificent houses and temples, and they carved wood imported from Syria to make furniture, which they often inlaid with precious stones covered with a thin layer of gold.¹⁵ This shows that the Egyptians had a variety of indigenous industrial skills and expertise that catered for their economic and social needs.

The discovery of iron and agriculture were mutually beneficial, as secure food supply gave cultivators the free time to develop other skills, while iron tools enabled them to put more land under cultivation, produce and store more food, and give them more time to develop even greater technical skills. The pre-colonial Gusii had clearly advanced beyond this level, as they were skilled in agriculture and iron working, which enabled them to branch into other activities like soapstone carving.¹⁶

Consequently, it can be argued that in the area of manufacturing, Africa had made great progress before colonialism. Unfortunately, according to Rodney, European writers associate the word “manufacture” with factories and machines.¹⁷ Thus when Europeans observed the lack of machinery in Africa, they must have erroneously concluded that Africans did not manufacture anything. Rodney emphasizes the literal meaning of the word “manufacture” to be “things made by hand,” and that in this sense African manufacturing had appreciably advanced.¹⁸ Rodney uses the parameter of quality to assess the level of African manufacturing. He ascertains that five centuries ago, African communities produced better quality products than those of other parts of the world, including a superior brand of red leather, made in the Hausa and Mandinka communities of Nigeria and Mali, which Europeans came to call “Moroccan leather”. Also, the

Portuguese who went to the Kongo Kingdom found superior bark cloths which were produced by the local people. The Baganda were also experts in bark cloth making.¹⁹ Of course the list of items manufactured in pre-colonial Africa is inexhaustible, and it also includes the functional items that the Kisii carved out of soapstone, as this study shows.

However, it should be stated that although Africans produced various types of high quality manufactured goods they had not made a break-through as regards to high speed and mass production of goods. As Rodney says, “It was in the level of scale that African manufacturers had not made a breakthrough”²⁰ in their industrial technological development. For instance the cotton looms and their iron smelters were small, and the pottery was done slowly by hand and not on a wheel. In most instances, each household or community met its own needs by making its own clothes, pots and mats. Nevertheless, using quality as a criterion, African manufactured goods were at par with the rest of the world. It is even possible that mass production would have developed in Africa, given sufficient time, as specialization and division of labour were already taking root at the time of European colonization. Indeed, even soapstone carving shows a certain level of labour division, which is organized according to gender

African industries continued developing during the colonial period which brought their products into direct competition with European manufacturers. In addition, if Africans continued working in their industries, this would have denied the European settlers a source of labour for their farms. Thus, the colonists felt compelled to suppress African industries in order to eliminate competition for the industrial products from their home countries, and to ensure a steady supply of labour for their farms and mines, which sent

raw materials to Europe to be transformed into finished products and sold back to the same Africans who helped to produce them.

Indigenous African iron manufacturing is a good example of how this was carried out. In his unpublished M. Phil thesis, “The Development of Some Aspects of Traditional Industries in Kenya, 1880-1990: A Case Study of Kiambu District,” Felistus Kanuna Kinyanjui shows how the colonialists used suppression of conflict as an excuse to close down traditional blacksmiths, who were makers of swords, spears and arrows. The blacksmiths were further disadvantaged by the importation of foreign manufactured farm tools, which limited their work to making of ritual items like circumcision knives.²¹ Gusii blacksmiths found themselves in a similar predicament, and so they turned to soapstone, which did not threaten any of the colonists’ industries as it is found and carved in relatively few places, and when considered as an art form, it does not compete directly with manufactured goods.

The arrival of European goods that came in bulk overshadowed those produced in the local African industries that were in small supply. In the long run, they satisfied the existing demand for manufactured goods in many parts of Africa, and eventually suffocated the indigenous production, cutting off the local producers from the market. Thus, the unequal competition for markets between mass-produced European goods and small scale indigenous manufactured products led to the arrest of the development of the industrial economy in most parts of Africa. In this respect soapstone sculptors were fortunate because they did not have to compete with similar artwork from anywhere else. However, the functional uses of soapstone (such as in making pipes, vases and bowls)

also disappeared as foreign manufactured goods dominated the market in the colonial period.

This state of affairs meant that indigenous technologies were eventually neglected owing to over-reliance on imported goods even in areas where locally produced goods could suffice. Therefore this research examines the status of the soapstone industry and whether the industry compliments or competes with the other industries or crafts in Kisii. The study traces its development through the colonial period and the post independence era until 2010. Since soapstone production has some characteristics in common with other traditional industries, they are also considered in studying the development of the soapstone industry in Kisii. The study also demonstrates the resilient nature of African industries in the face of numerous challenges.

1.3. Study Area.

The current area inhabited by the Gusii (Kisii) community covers a total land area of approximately 800 square miles. It is situated between longitude 35 °30' and latitude 0 °30' South. Gusii land forms part of former Nyanza province. It is made up of Nyamira, Kisii, Gucha, Borabu, Manga, Masaba, Kisii South and Kisii Central Districts. Gusii region borders Kericho District in the North, Buret and Bomet districts in the east, and Transmara district in the south, all of which are within the expansive Rift Valley province. In former Nyanza Province, Gusii land borders with Rachuonyo and Homa Bay districts in the west and Migori district in the southwest.²²The terms Gusii and Kisii are used interchangeably in this thesis.

Gusii-land has recently been divided into eight districts. Gucha district covers Bomachoge, Bobasi, Bokione and Bombaba. Gucha South covers South Mugirango. Kisii Central consists of Nyaribari Chache, while Kisii South covers Bonchari. The Manga district comprises Itibo and Manga areas, while Masaba district covers Ibacho, Masimba and Rigoma areas. Borabu district covers the settlement schemes of Nyansiongo, Kijauri and Tinderet.²³ With the passing of the new constitution in 2010, Gusii-land has been reconstituted under two counties, namely Kisii and Nyamira.

Gusii region is relatively hilly and the terrain rises in the south east direction to an altitude of 7000 feet (2,134 meters) and slopes west-wards (in the direction of lake Victoria) reaching an altitude of 4,500 feet (1372 meters) at its lowest point. The region has a diverse physiography ranging from flat-bottomed valleys that are the source of many streams, rivers and riparian land forms. The area also consists of several escarpments, hills and mountains, like the Vinyo escarpment to the south west of the region which is bisected by a large gorge through which river Gucha flows into Lake Victoria. There is also the Manga escarpment in the North West which is broken by deep valleys which form the source of streams and rivers.²⁴

The most prominent rivers that drain Gusii-land are the Gucha and Sondu respectively. Gucha River has its source in North Mugirango and traverses Kitutu, Nyaribari, Bobasi, Machoge and South Mugirango locations on to Homa Bay where it drains into Lake Victoria. The Sondu River starts in the Sotik/Borabu area and flows in the Northern parts of Gusii-land along the boundary with Kericho district. The river enters Nyakach and then drains into Lake Victoria. The region also possesses many swamps in valley bottoms like Sironga, Riamoni, Nyanturago and Chirichiro.²⁵

Blessed with fertile soils of volcanic origin, Gusii-land as a whole is an area of high agricultural potential. Relief, drainage and existing rock formations have thus influenced the soil formation in the area. The high altitude areas have dark humic alluvium soil whereas the lower lying areas in the west consist mainly of a mixture of light coloured humid clay soil. The soils therefore are very fertile and suitable for various agricultural activities. The land is also quite ideal for the growing of a variety of crops such as coffee, tea, pyrethrum, maize and bananas.

Rainfall in the region is plentiful. It ranges from an average of over 2000mm in the east to about 1600mm in the west. Rainfall is bimodal. The long rains start towards the end of February and end in May while the short rains start in August through to December. Mean annual temperatures range from 14°C to 26°C in areas of high and low altitude respectively.²⁶

Because of the favourable conditions, the Gusii people practice mixed farming. They are active cultivators of coffee, tea, pyrethrum, maize, bananas and a variety of vegetables besides other crops. Agriculture is their major economic activity as it provides for both subsistence and commercial wellbeing of the people. Livestock rearing is also central to the Gusii economy. It is no wonder, therefore, that necessity prompted them to develop indigenous industries, including iron working, pottery and soapstone production, to be able to meet their agricultural needs of clearing forests for farming, tilling land, storage and cooking of foods.²⁷

Gusii-land can be divided into two ecological zones based on the differences in altitude, rainfall, temperatures and soil distribution. These zones have over the years been

recognized by the Gusii people who refer to the lower ecological zone in the west as Chache (west) and the higher ecological zone in the east as Masaba (East). These ecological differences have also influenced land use patterns and population distribution differences.²⁸

Apart from agriculture, the Gusii community practiced various economic activities including traditional crafts production, various forms of trade, subsistence hunting and embroidery, among others. The region is particularly well endowed with diverse natural resources and minerals such as traces of iron ore, salt, copper, soapstone, wood and papyrus. These resources enabled the Gusii people to undertake various industrial production activities to produce various goods that they needed for their sustenance.²⁹

Some of these industrial products were sold to neighbouring communities such as the Luo, Kipsigis and Maasai. Examples of industrial products that were made by the Gusii include hoes, pangas, spears and arrows, knives and razors, baskets, bracelets, leather products, wooden ware, soapstone carvings and musical instruments. These industrial products that were produced using local material, indigenous skills and knowledge, were well adapted to the Gusii social and natural environment. The industrial products went a long way in enriching Gusii livelihoods and promoting long term socio-economic well being. The soapstone industry was well established in pre-colonial times, with its products being sold to neighbouring communities.³⁰ The current status of the soapstone industry can be regarded as a continuous development from the traditional soapstone industry in pre-colonial Kisii.

Soapstone carving is usually restricted to places where soapstone naturally occurs. In Kenya, soapstone is found in the Kisii region, particularly at the locations of Tabaka and Goti Chaki. There are also other deposits at Sameta hills though the area has not been exploited for the production of stone items. The quarries are scattered in these areas given that the special stone is not a continuous occurrence. The carving therefore either takes place just next to the quarries or in the nearby carving and selling centres.

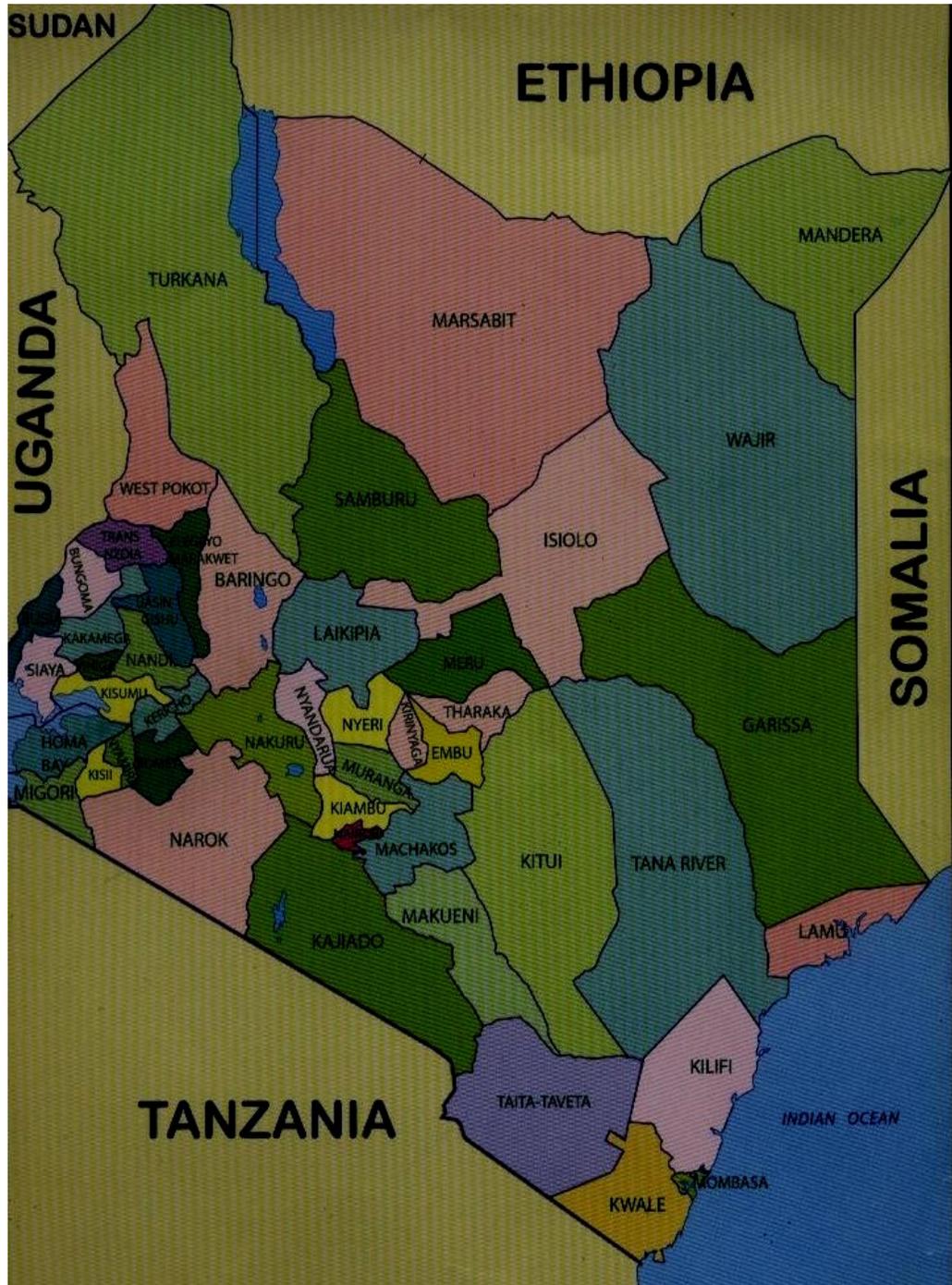


Figure 1: Location of Kisi District

Adopted from Republic of Kenya Counties (2012)

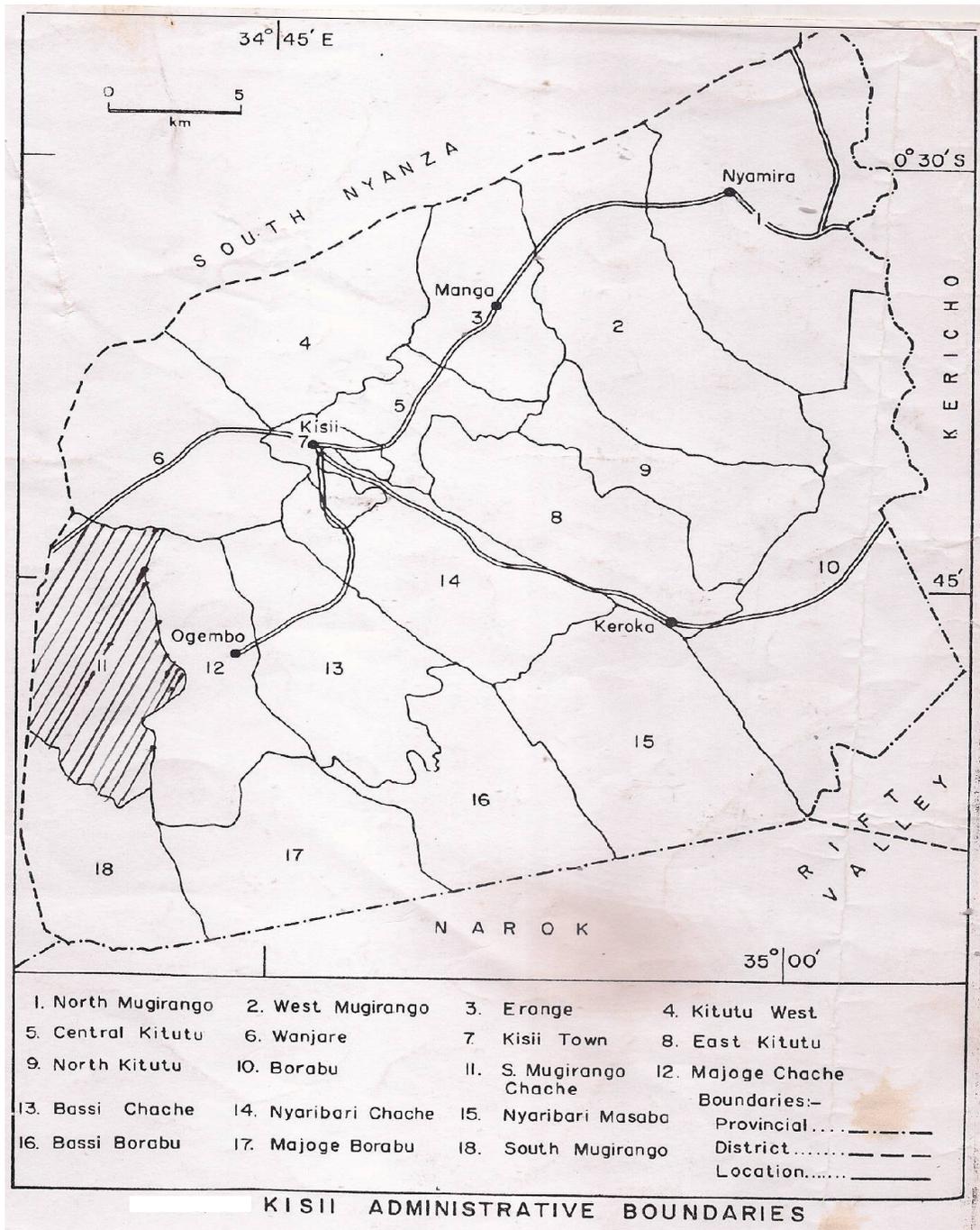


Figure 2: Map of Study Area

1.4 Statement of the Problem

The soapstone industry is one of the traditional industries that existed among the Gusii people, together with iron working, basketry, leatherworks and several other types of

weaving. All these industries were carried out to produce goods for utility purposes such as hoes, arrows, spears, axes, knives and razors from iron, and baskets, mats and other containers from reeds. At the advent of colonialism the Europeans came into Kenya with mass produced finished goods that looked better and more convenient to use, so that the traditional items lost their appeal. Africans were forced to abandon the local industrial products because they could not compete favorably with the mass produced European products.

Consequently most local industries or handicrafts were either suffocated to a halt like the iron working industry or they were reduced to producing non-sellable items. However, the soapstone industry has however survived the colonial times and mutated into an art form for the tourist market and yet it has maintained its production for local utility. To date, soapstone carving remains one of Kenya's most famous and recognized traditional industries both locally and internationally. The published literature on traditional industries/handicrafts focuses mainly on pottery, basketry and wood-carving, thus more research is needed on the unique soapstone carving. In order to document the development of the soapstone industry in Kisii area, it was necessary to carry out a study of this nature, as the subject matter has not been fully researched. Therefore this study aimed at finding out the reasons behind the resilience of the soapstone industry while other local handicrafts have fizzled out with the introduction of western items; the cultural attachments to the production that have made it survive; and how it has kept changing in terms of items produced to suit the needs of specific times up to the present.

1.5 Objectives

The main objective of the study was to address the origin, development and impact of the socio-cultural, economic and political aspects of the soapstone industry in Kisii from the beginning of the colonial era (1895) as well as the effect of different aspects of the soapstone industry on Kisii culture, and vice versa, up to the end of the study period.

The following specific objectives guided this study:

1. To examine the uses of various soapstone sculptures
2. To account for the factors that influenced the resilience of soapstone industry as well as the changes in its uses.
3. To determine the effects of market forces on soapstone industries
4. To assess how the carving has impacted on the culture of the local community
5. To examine the future the soapstone industry in Kisii.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the theory of sustainable livelihood by Robert Chamber.³¹ A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of a living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capacities and assets both now and in the future without undermining its natural resource base.³² Livelihoods are not simply a localized phenomenon, but connected by environmental, economic, political and cultural process to wider national, regional and global areas. The sustainability of a livelihood is ascertained by its sensibility, hardiness and resiliency in the face of short and long term challenges.³³

This theory therefore focuses its attention on developing the underlying resources and capacities needed to escape poverty in a sustainable manner. If resources are sustained they lead to development. Development of soap stone has emerged as an alternative way of conceptualizing poverty alleviation including its context, objectives and priorities. It focuses on one of the most fundamental aspects of life, the ability of people to support themselves, both now and into the future.

Sustainable livelihood analysis (SLA) does so in a manner that views livelihoods within both micro and macro contexts, spanning both physical and social environments at the local to the global levels.³⁴ The theory of sustainable livelihoods identifies three elements which build up the sustainable process which include sustainable livelihood assets, vulnerability context, and techniques and interventions. Assets are the building blocks of sustainable livelihood. By building assets, individuals and houses develop their capacity to cope with the challenges they encounter and to meet their needs on a sustainable basis. The theory draws attention to the variety of assets that contribute to making a sustainable livelihood and to ways in which they are interdependent. The vulnerability context refers to the factors that create and perpetuate vulnerability and poverty. This directs attention to the contextual and systematic factors that contribute to the occurrence of poverty.\

The techniques and interventions include practical interventions which facilitate the effect of low income household to build their livelihood assets. They include such things as counseling programs, education, employment, training, economic literacy and saving programs and support for small business development. Strategic interventions are directed towards the vulnerability context. They work towards the goal of social and

economic change at the systemic level (Chambers and Conway 1992). Sustainability livelihood theory is particularly suited when dealing with crisis situations where people have to adapt rapidly to changes.³⁵

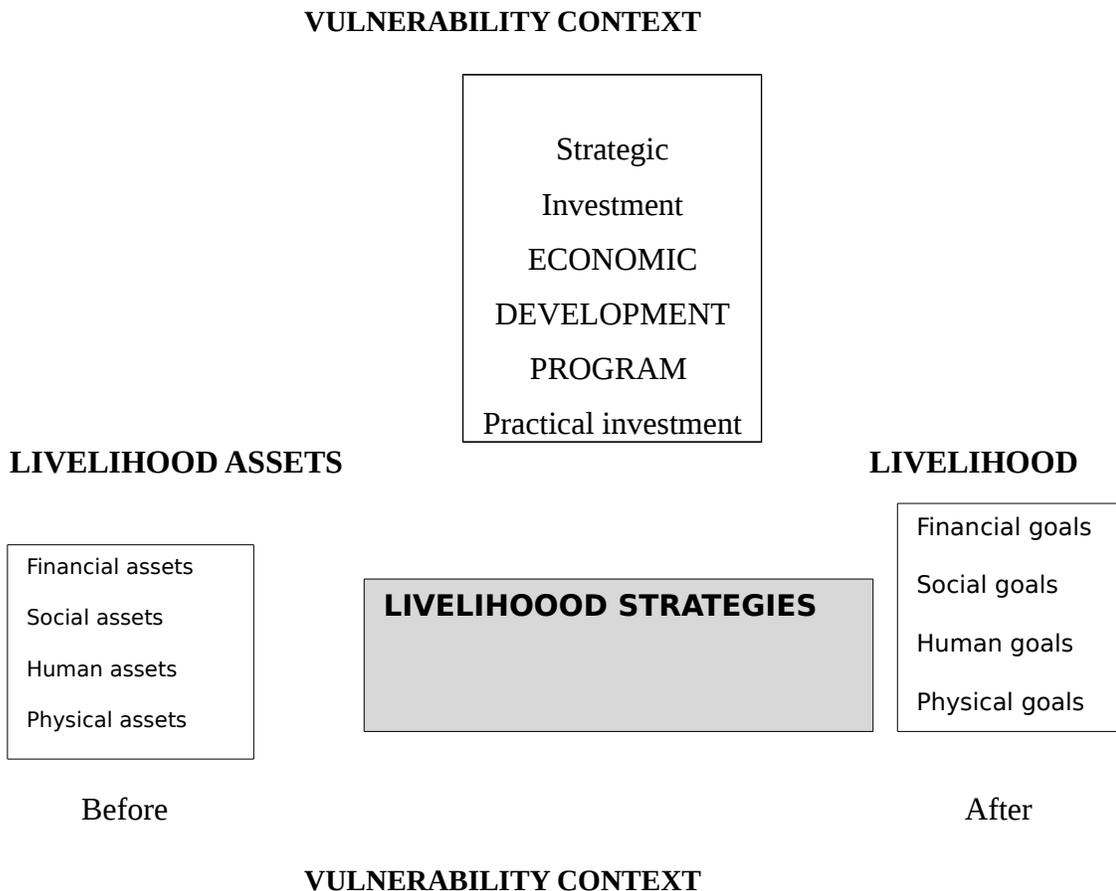
The livelihood strategies which individuals adopt reflect their choices in building an asset, namely gaining more from their everyday activities such as soapstone. To maintain sustainability, individuals must not only develop their career and skills but must maintain the available livelihood assets. This includes national capital, social capital, church capital, physical capital and financial capital.³⁶

National capital such as land is sustained through mitigation measures to control erosion as well as the implementation of mitigation control. Social capital encompasses society, culture and the historical moment in which he or she lives. In analyzing the society and culture we recognize that behaviour of individuals is determined by structures and networks of social relationships and obligation and by shared knowledge and values. Human capital includes human assets such as education and health. Through proper management of human capital, resources are exploited and livelihood is sustained.

This theory closely applies to the activities of the soapstone industry in Kisii where different resources are used to sustain the livelihoods of the soapstone carvers and their dependants. The soapstone dealers and producers use knowledge of integration to produce and develop. They also use production knowledge, decimation of knowledge and application of knowledge to exploit production. The purposes of knowledge integration

include broadening, reconfiguration and synthesis. The forms of knowledge integration include theory of integration, system integration and institutional integration.

The diagram below summarizes three key dimension of a sustainable livelihood framework.



Source: The Role of program interventions Adapted from DFID (1999) Sustainable livelihoods Guidance Sheets

From the above diagram it can be concluded that the livelihood assets of the soapstone industry are assisted by livelihood strategies to bring about development programs. These development programs improve the living standards of the people. However, they must be sustained to continue holding the livelihoods.

As conceived above, the world systems theory only analyses group social economic development. They do not come down to individual communities to be able to understand their activities better. It is true for example those not all economic activities have collapsed among African communities. There are those sources of livelihood that have survived the colonial and post-colonial international pressures to date. They still serve the local community needs. The soapstone industry among the Kisii people is one such industry that has survived the periods and surveyed the local people with both items of utility and artistic commercial items. This research therefore uses the sustainable livelihoods approach to explain the resilience of this livelihood among the Kisii people.

1.7 Justification of the Study

The aim of this study is to document the development of the soapstone industry in Kisii area. It is necessary to carry out a study of this nature, as the subject matter has not been fully researched and the study intends to fill the gap. This research was useful in providing relevant information to traditional industries/handicrafts, especially concerning marketing and organization of their production.

This study should also be useful to policy makers in the area of employment and income generation, as soapstone carving provides gainful employment to large numbers of people in the Kisii region. In addition, it provides opportunities for those who market soapstone products in other parts of Kenya as well as internationally. Thus this research is important to the country's national need of creating awareness and promoting indigenous technology for sustainable development and self-reliance. This should assist in employment creation, poverty alleviation, and the reduction of over reliance in imported

technologies and industrial products. Stakeholders in tourism can also benefit from this research, as soapstone is a relatively rare natural resource, therefore tourists can be encouraged to come to Kenya to see where soapstone is found and how it is carved. This could have a significant impact on the economy, especially in the soapstone producing area.

Finally, it is urgent that the information on traditional industries such as soapstone carving is researched and systematically documented because most of the custodians of traditional knowledge are the elderly who are gradually dying out, making it important to have this vital information recorded for posterity.

1.8. Literature review

The main objective of the study was to explain why the soapstone industry has thrived and continues to thrive in both colonial and post- colonial Kenya, in sharp contrast with other traditional industries such as pottery and basketry which are either dying out or only exist at a basic subsistence level. In order to achieve the purpose of this study, the research focused on documenting the uses of various soapstone sculptures, accounting for the factors that influenced the changes in the uses of soapstone, determining the effects of market forces on soapstone industries, assessing how the carving has impacted on the culture of the local community and making recommendations on how to improve the soapstone industry in Kisii. Consequently this section reviews literature in the following themes namely: soapstone as an industry and art, origin of soapstone carving, uses of soapstone, and Factors affecting soapstone industry development.

This review is done with cognizant that there is relatively scant literature on soapstone carving in Kenya and other parts of the world. This is because soapstone carving is restricted to areas where it is available such as Kisii in Kenya. This is unlike pottery, basketry and woodwork which are almost universally practiced because their raw materials are widely available. Thus they are well documented.

Soapstone Industry or Art

Soapstone carving is often regarded as an indigenous or traditional industry. The development of indigenous industries is not peculiar to Kenyan communities as we shall see from various works of research that are presented in this study. Traditional industries had developed in Egypt before the birth of Jesus Christ. Egyptians were well known sculptors and artisans. This is evident in the totemic sculptures they made representing their gods such as Thoth and Cynocephalus. The magnificent pyramids and masks made to cover their mummified kings' faces are also evidence of great African art.³⁷

In their book, M.A. Ogotu and Joseph Kenyanichui have examined diverse indigenous African industries in different parts of Africa. They present the various indigenous industries and locations where they were established in the African continent³⁸ In particular, they ascertain that various traditional industries especially pottery, basketry, woodwork and leather works developed as a result of the development of agriculture for domestic use and peoples' improvement of their overall standards of living. For instance, the discovery of fire and the need to cook and store food led to the invention of pots.³⁹

In the case of soapstone, there is lack of consensus among authors in defining whether it should be considered as a traditional industry or as an art form. Langenkamp⁴⁰ states that

the perception of a craft as either a traditional village industry or as an artistic craft is largely dependent on the viewpoint of the observer and/or consumer. She gives the example of a well finished and designed water pot which is perceived as utility ware by Kenyans, while an overseas consumer probably perceives the same pot as a decorative piece.⁴¹ This suggests that a soapstone article can be either a handicraft or art depending on the purchaser.

Another clue to the classification of soapstone products is provided by the UNCTAD definition, which has become widely accepted.⁴² This definition was developed for the purpose of facilitating trade in handicrafts. It states; “The term handicraft covers articles produced with simple tools or instruments in most cases peddle powered or handled by the craftsman himself or with no tools at all. The category includes items which often have additional characteristics such as traditional or artistic features typical of the country or region in which they are produced”

This definition can be widely interpreted. Therefore, in 1981 the Kenya External Trade Authority specified that it applied to Wood Carvings, Sisal Baskets, Soapstone Carvings, Jewelry and others.⁴³ For, for export purposes, soapstone sculpture in Kenya is considered a handicraft. It is important to make this distinction between soapstone as a handicraft (traditional industry) and as art, in order to assess how the development of the soapstone industry in Kisii has been affected by these perceptions of outsiders. This distinction acquires even more significance from the higher prices that buyers pay for art as opposed to handicrafts. In order to fully appreciate the value of soapstone, this review will examine its functional and aesthetic uses.

Origin of soapstone carving

Soapstone is nowadays used in the fabrication of various ornamental items. Before World War I, it was used to make functional items such as smoking pipes, cooking utensils, vases for storing food and three-legged stools.⁴⁴ Even today, it is still used to make household utensils such as sugar bowls. In the course of time the functional uses of soapstone were supplanted by other materials. For example, aluminum cooking ware replaced soapstone cooking utensils and vases for storing food. However the amount of soapstone art produced in pre-colonial times does not appear to have been significant compared to the amount of functional items made of soapstone.

In the book, “*The Ethnography of the Gusii of Western Kenya*”, Kennedy Inyega mentions the rock art paintings, stone alignment and soapstone production in Kisii. Here soapstone carvings were made at Goti Chaki in Gucha district in the Southern parts of Kisii land. These various forms of industrial production activities indicate that Kisii indigenous industries date back to the pre-colonial period. Inyega further argues that the Kisii people might have started by scribbling wild animal images on the soapstone rocks before they started carving wildlife and household items, and later producing other industrial products.

Inyega findings are supported by Eisemon *et al.*, who state that soapstone carving in Kisii began with the men of the Bomware subclan of the Bogirango clan in Tabaka village, 20 kilometres southwest of Kisii town. The Bomware subclan were associated with iron smelting, an activity that was shrouded with secret knowledge.⁴⁵ The precise date when the men of the Bomware subclan began carving soapstone is unknown, but it must have

followed the demise of traditional iron smelting. They also mention that soapstone rocks on hills near Tabaka have old carvings on them which are difficult to date.

Ong'esa ⁴⁶ also states that soapstone carvings were done before the Kisii settled in their current homeland in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century. This is corroborated by modern soapstone sculptors who say that the hill carvings were made by earlier peoples (probably non Kisii), and by the carvings at Goti Chaki mentioned earlier by Inyega.⁴⁷

Thus from the work of the aforementioned authors it is clear that soapstone carving was carried out in Kisii from pre-colonial times, and that it produced items of both functional and aesthetic value, which today would be classified as handcrafts and artwork respectively. Thus it can be inferred that soapstone carving was primarily done for functional purposes, and that soapstone art production began as a secondary activity that gained importance later.

Use of soapstone

Although there is not much international literature on soapstone production, due to the relative scarcity of naturally occurring soapstone, Eisemon et al⁴⁸ compare and contrast the soapstone industries of Kisii and Canada. The authors insist that the initial soapstone products of both the Kisii and Inuit peoples (of northern Quebec, Canada) were merely functional objects which were not regarded as art. Apparently Inuit soapstone carvings only acquired art status when they were promoted by an artist from another area of Canada. The soapstone industry's development in Kisii followed a similar pattern, beginning as a method of making functional items, and then blossoming into an art form after the Second World War.

Prior to the production of commercial soapstone art, Kisii soapstone carvers “continued to produce functional objects and some of them began carving animal figures for occasional visitors”⁴⁹ Its growth as an art is attributed to one Edward Koenigsburger, a Kisumu based businessman, who purchased handicrafts in Kisii and encouraged local soapstone carvers to produce commercial art.⁵⁰ Eisemon *et al* also state that the Kisii have a tradition of woodcarving, similar to the Kamba and the Makonde community of Tanzania. Kamba and Makonde woodcarvings gained international attention as commercial art, and Kisii soapstone sculptures followed their production models.⁵¹ The development of soapstone carving as an industry also changed the nature of production, as traditionally Kisii and Inuit carvers did not earn a living from carving. Eisemon *et al* explain that modern economic and political institutions eroded the preservation of traditions, thereby transforming soapstone carving into a traditional activity and soapstone sculptors into persons responsible for maintaining culture.⁵²

Factors affecting soapstone industry development

Market forces play a significant role in the soapstone industry, because soapstone carving is a major economic activity in Kisii. According to Maranga⁵³ in his article, “Self-Employed Soapstone Carvers In Kisii,” there are an estimated 4,000 individuals in Kisii who derive some income from soapstone production and marketing. This is a significant number of people, which probably does not include dependants. Therefore, any change in the market value of soapstone products is likely to affect them, either positively or negatively. For this reason it is important to establish how market forces affect soapstone carvers in Kisii.

At this point it is worth remembering that soapstone products fetch different prices depending on whether they are classified as handicrafts or as artwork by the producers and buyers, with handicrafts being much cheaper. Most of the functional items, such as sugar bowls, ashtrays and so on, can be classified as handicrafts. These are usually sold to local consumers, and they fetch higher prices than similar items made of other materials, such as wood, though they are still cheaper than artistic carvings.

On the other hand, artistic soapstone carvings, such as sculptures of people or animals, tend to be classified as works of art and they fetch correspondingly higher prices. Initially, foreign tourists provided the main market for soapstone sculpture. It is however noteworthy that the domestic market for soapstone carvings is growing, especially in urban areas. The soapstone carvings that are bought by tourists are usually displayed in curio shops. The curio shops normally commission soapstone sculptors to produce a certain number of identical carvings at a certain price. They may even give the carvers samples of what they want. This kind of work is sometimes described as “commercial art,” to distinguish it from “fine art.” Unfortunately for the carvers, this type of uniform carving stifles creativity and lowers prices. Only the older, expert carvers dare to innovate, as this earns them more money.

According to Atieno’s study, *Export Marketing: A Case Study Of Handicraft Exporters In Kenya*,⁵⁴ the advantages of Kenyan handicrafts are that they provide high potentialities of self-employment, they have the ability to penetrate foreign markets, they are efficient foreign exchange earners since no imported inputs are required, and they generate foreign exchange through export and the tourist market trade. Market forces thus play a role in the livelihood of carvers. The increasing numbers of young people joining the soapstone

industry is due to the harsh economic times. The law of supply and demand shows that the returns from the industry will go down. However, there is still hope for soapstone sculptors in the area of fine art.

A closer examination of Atieno's statement reveals the current status of the soapstone industry to be a mixed blessing. Self-employment is a positive attribute of soapstone carving, provided the industry is not flooded with new carvers. Penetration of foreign markets requires aggressive marketing and government support, especially in countries with restrictive trade rules. Thus it is easier for soapstone sculptors to sell their products to tourists in Kenya, as opposed to exporting them directly to foreign markets. The efficiency of soapstone production in terms of lack of expensive inputs is a favourable characteristic of the industry, but this may change if the government decides to tax the informal sector.

A closer examination of the potential of fine art as a source of income for soapstone sculptors is necessary. In order to be classified as fine art, the quality of a soapstone sculpture has to be considerably higher than that of the commercial art. This requires a level of skill that can only be met by the more experienced soapstone sculptors. Nevertheless, fine art production is a viable option for those who are skilled enough to produce it. According to Myers article, "A Brief History of the Marketing of Canadian Inuit Art"⁵⁵ the Canadian soapstone sculptors have more experience of producing fine art soapstone sculpture. They initially organized themselves into cooperatives to sell their work as commercial art. In this process, individual carvers were recognized for their work and invited to give exhibitions, where their art was sold to collectors for higher prices than they could get through their cooperatives. The largest Canadian soapstone

cooperative, the Povungnituk Sculptors Society, established a marketing office in Quebec City, which later became La Federation des Cooperatives du Nouveau Quebec (The Federation of Northern Quebec Cooperatives) which continues to market the soapstone sculpture of the Inuit people of Northern Quebec.⁵⁶

The Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society (KSCCS) followed in the footsteps of their Canadian counterparts. The two organizations collaborated to stage a joint exhibition in Canada, where participating sculptors from both countries were able to get exposure and to sell their work.⁵⁷ As stated earlier, soapstone carving has been practiced continuously in Kisii from pre-colonial times. However, the types of items produced and their significance have changed over time. The forms in which soapstone sculpture are produced today differ from those of the past.

According to Eisemon et al ⁵⁸, “soapstone carving as it is done today was suggested to the Inuit and Gusii as an artistic medium by people outside their cultures who purchased craft objects made of soapstone and encouraged local artisans to produce objects that were authentic to the two cultures. This cultural intrusion has had some fortunate effects. (It) has provided an opportunity for societies undergoing rapid social change to innovate upon traditions that might otherwise disappear, and an economic incentive to strengthen them.” Eisemon et al., are saying that soapstone carving was practiced in both communities mostly for functional purposes, and that it was the intervention of outsiders (such as Mr. Koenigsburger) which led to soapstone carving’s present day status as a commercial and fine art. As traditional culture is relentlessly eroded by modernization, soapstone carving acts as a form of cultural preservation. This is because many soapstone sculptors have adopted cultural themes in their work, such as traditional folktales, legends

and symbols. Therefore the soapstone carvers act as a conservatory of cultural themes through their sculpture.

Masai concurs with this view. In her paper, “Training For Self Employment: The Case Of Handicrafts In Kenya,” He reports that there has been a renaissance of activities and interest in the handicrafts sector in many countries, and that handicrafts can facilitate economic, social and cultural development. Finally, he states that handicrafts facilitate the preservation and the strengthening of the cultural identity of a country and its people.⁵⁹

There are other cultural aspects of soapstone carving. For instance, although soapstone carving generates employment, there is a very strict, culturally enforced division of labour at soapstone carving locations in Kisii ⁶⁰ where the men purchase and carve the soapstone while women and children polish and sell it to the final consumer. There are reasons to believe that such an arrangement is advantageous to men as they are in control of the whole process. In this aspect of gender, soapstone production has had very little impact on cultural gender relations. These gender based aspects of soapstone production provide a fertile field for further research, which is however beyond the scope of the current study. Finally, this literature review aims to make recommendations that can be used to improve the soapstone industry in Kisii and therefore show how the soapstone industry developed in Kisii, and to supplement the information in the literature with information from other sources.

1.9 Methodology

A combination of different methodologies has been used to obtain data for this study. The researcher has used both primary and secondary sources for data collection. To obtain primary data, semi structured interviews were conducted at both individual and group levels. Open ended questions were used to collect data in order to allow respondents freedom to give as much information as possible. Archival sources were also used as important sources of information. The researcher targeted annual reports, trade books, district records, and any other relevant material. This was done at the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi. These were used to corroborate or refute the authenticity of the views expressed in oral interviews and secondary data.

Secondary sources especially books, theses, dissertations, journals, articles, periodicals and magazines were used. The literature was located at the Kenya National Archives, Kisii County Council Archives, Moi University library, and at the Kenya National Library Services. The secondary sources gave an idea on the nature and extent of work already done on the field of technological history in Kenya. They also supported analysis and discussion based on the primary sources.

The field research was conducted between August 2011 and December 2011 in South Mugirango constituency. Seventy respondents were interviewed during the research. The researcher interviewed respondents born in 1950s because they understand the growth of the soapstone industry from their parents, through the colonial period to present. They also had recollections of information about the soapstone industry's origin that they heard from their own parents and grandparents. Therefore they were expected to be more

knowledgeable and resourceful than younger persons. The researcher interviewed five respondents in this group owing to their scarcity because of age and experience.

Ten youths were also interviewed, with the purpose of finding out how they use innovation to advance soapstone production. Three senior co-operative officials; the chairman, secretary general and treasurer of two co-operatives as well as two opinion leaders were also interviewed to get clarity on information given. Three quarry owners were also interviewed to understand issues of quarrying and purchasing of stones. Seven focus group interviews of six people each were conducted. These were done using guiding questions. Two groups of men, two of women and three group of men and women mixed were done so as to take care of gender issues. A minimum of three wholesale buyers of soapstone products who had been active in the industry over a long period of time were also interviewed.

Oral interviews were used at both individual and group level. Guide questions were used in areas like acquisition of raw materials, skill acquisition, and distribution of industrial products. Formulation of questions on the spot was also a very important part of the interview to get details not captured in the other questions. Several criteria were used in selecting the respondents. Purposive sampling was used to select artwork or handicrafts, individuals, groups and organizations that would provide the greatest insight into the phenomena under study on the basis of their involvement in any of the industries under research. This technique was used because, these were the only people in these capacities and they were necessary for the study.

The researcher conducted a reconnaissance survey by visiting the soapstone producing areas, and asking to speak to the oldest soapstone carvers, namely those born before 1959. Arrangements were then made with the respondents who met the criteria, for the researcher to return and interview them at a later date. Snowball sampling technique was used since it was extremely difficult or cost prohibitive to locate respondents that were not settled in the quarry. Informants were identified through the guidance of area chiefs and guides. This technique reduced the likelihood that the sample would represent a good section from the entire population. The researcher endeavored to ensure that the informants were representative of the whole area of South Mogirango by selecting people from different parts of the constituency, using random and stratified random sampling. To guard against the possibility of respondents exaggerating their responses, the researcher tried to corroborate the information gathered from different respondents so as to determine the truth.

The oral interviews were conducted in Ekegusii, Kiswahili and English to account for speakers of all languages, as some persons, especially customers from other places, are not fluent in the local language. Therefore the researcher did not anticipate any language barrier. The oral interviews were based on a standard questionnaire, although there were many open ended questions to allow respondents to elaborate on their responses.

These methods allowed the researcher to arrive at the most comprehensive and reliable information. Most of the interviews were conducted at soapstone quarries, markets and workshops, although some interviews were conducted at respondents' homes when necessary. The interviews were recorded on tapes and later transcribed, for accuracy of

information. However, when a respondent objected to the recording of his/her voice, then the researcher resorted to writing notes of the interview.

Data analysis was done using the grounded theory procedure articulated by Yin's ⁶¹ solutions for assuring data verification strategies. Multiple sources of information were used in the form of three kinds of sources, namely literature review on previous empirical research, primary data in the form of interviews with carvers, owners of the quarry and business people who were born before 1959 and direct observation. Qualitative data was analysed in order to systematically describe common themes, concerns and opinions by participants. The study attempted to seek relationships between such themes in order to arrive at implications for policy.

Generally, data analysis involved coding and developing categories based on research objectives. However, the study also undertook careful examination of unsolicited explanations with a view to develop extra relevant insights to the study and to avoid bias in interpretation. Research assistants were also allowed to critically examine data analysis for possible errors and untrue representation of the population.

1.10 Conclusion

It is worth noting that the soapstone industry in the Tabaka area of Kisii County involves extraction of raw materials and application processes to these raw materials so as to produce finished products of the soap stone, this requires industrial and entrepreneurial skills. These skills have been developed over time from the period between 1895 and 2010. The period 1895 was chosen because it marked the onset of British colonial rule in Kenya. By this time the Gusii people as a community was engaging in production and

trade with their neighbours one such form of production was the carving of soapstone which was subsequently sold to the neighbouring community. Therefore, this chapter has discussed the background to the development of the soapstone industry in Tabaka area of Kisii County

End Notes

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CHAPTER TWO

SOAP STONE INDUSTRY IN THE CONTEXT OF PRE-COLONIAL GUSII

ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

2.0 Introduction

This chapter looked into the soapstone industry in the pre-colonial period. It aimed at highlighting the development of the industry before the colonial era so as to examine how the subsequent colonial rule affected the industry. The chapter also discussed the economic activities of the Gusii apart from soapstone carving.

2.1. Origin of Soapstone Industry

As presented in the previous Chapter, rock art paintings, stone alignment and soapstone production were the main industrial production in Kisii before the onset of British colonial rule. Distinct examples of rock art inscriptions are found at Goti Chaki and Sameta Hills not far from Tabaka.¹The various forms of industrial production activities indicate that Kisii indigenous industries date back to the pre-colonial period. According to Inyega the Gusii people might have started this art by scribbling wild animal images on the soapstone rocks before they started carving wildlife and household items, and later producing other industrial products. These findings are supported by Eisemon et al., who state that soapstone carving in Kisii began with the men of the Bomware sub-clan of the Bogirango clan in Tabaka village, 20 kilometres southwest of Kisii town. The Bomware sub-clan were associated with iron smelting, an activity that was shrouded with secrecy.²

The precise date when the men of the Bomware sub-clan began carving soapstone is unknown, but it must have been done simultaneously with iron ore smelting. They also mention that soapstone rocks on hills near Tabaka have old carvings on them which are

difficult to date. Ong'esa ³ states that these carvings were done before the Kisii settled in their current homeland in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century. This is corroborated by modern soapstone sculptors who assert that the stone carvings at Goti Chaki and Sameta were made by earlier occupants of the areas (probably non Bantu).⁴

Among the rock carvings at Goti Chaki are an *ajua* board, which shows that the people who made these carvings played this game. However, *ajua* is common all over sub-Saharan Africa, and so it is ethnographically difficult to establish who these rock carvers were. Apart from Tabaka and Goti Chaki, soapstone is also found at other sites in Kisii, such as Bosinange, Nyabigena (in the Moma Hills) and Sameta. The stones appear in different colours such as pure white, black, grey, yellow and pink. However, these prehistoric rock carvings are not being preserved, except for photographs and samples at the Kisumu Museum as observed by the researcher. However, due to lack of any conservation initiatives this prehistoric rock art is rapidly being damaged and disappearing from the various historical sites in the Kisii region.⁵

As stated elsewhere, the prehistoric soapstone sites in Kisii have not been dated, but Kisii oral history indicates that the sculptures pre-date the arrival of the Kisii in their current homeland. Perhaps it will be of historical significance if a comparison is undertaken between the rock art in Kisii with that found in other areas of the continent, specifically in southern Tanzania, South Africa, the Nile Valley and the Sahara desert. This would be in order to determine whether such artwork spread from one area to another or whether it developed independently by different people. Apparently, Kisii oral history, according to Ong'esa, mentions a man named Nogori and his son, Moraro, who came from Bobasi, who were engaged in some form of soapstone artwork or carving in the pre-colonial era.⁶

However, they died mysteriously, and the work of carving was taken up by other people who continued with it until the arrival of Europeans.

In his book *The Pre-Colonial History of the Gusii*, William R. Ochieng provides substantial contribution to the study of the community's indigenous industries. He provides an insight into the various industrial products that the Gusii people used to exchange with their neighbours the Luo, Kipsigis and Maasai. The Kisii produced iron implements such as hoes, axes, spears, arrows, knives and razors. These were especially manufactured by the Kisii clans of Kitutu and North Mugirango. Ornamental iron works like arm rings, leg rings and earrings were also produced in the Kisii community. Iron work was also scattered in other parts of Kisii including Bobasi, Machoge and South Mugirango. Apart from iron work, Ochieng also mentions the manufacturing of soapstone products such as pipes, bowls, and models of animals, snakes, birds and human beings. The Kisii sold the above items to their neighbouring communities in exchange for cattle, salt, hides, ghee, milk and drums.

An interpretation of Ochieng's findings suggests that soapstone was initially used to produce items of functional value, and that later soapstone was carved to make art objects like statuettes of people and animals, although the art was not produced on a commercial scale. Furthermore, interviews with soapstone carvers in Kisii revealed that the main uses for soapstone among the Kisii during the pre-colonial era included making vessels to store traditional medicines, smoking pipes, bowls and soapstone powder. The powder (which was also stored in soapstone vessels) was used to decorate people for traditional activities such as rainmaking and initiation ceremonies, where the initiates were disguised by being completely covered in soapstone powder, as they were ritually considered to be

wild animals, and hence they were named *ebisimba* (wild cats).⁷ Mr. Elkanah Ong'esa reveals that soapstone powder was also used during divining ceremonies, in which the diviner would smear the powder on the hands and face of the person who had come to consult him, in order to find out what was wrong with him or her.⁸

Information gathered by the researcher indicates that in pre-colonial Gusii society, soapstone was used to make small containers for traditional medicines, dyes, and for making mortars to crush leaves. The rock art in soapstone found at Goti Chaki and other sites had ritual significance. For instance, carvings/drawings of animals on soapstone with arrows directed towards them represented magical beliefs that animals would be killed during a hunt, as a result of drawing the image in soapstone.⁹

One of the factors that influenced the development of soapstone industry at Tabaka area is the natural occurrence of a rich natural resource of soapstone. This is evident with the many quarries in the area. The quarries of Nyabigena, Nyabigege and Moma are confined in the area of Tabaka and the rocks are partially covered. It is therefore possible that it was through trial and error or even accidental that the discovery of the soft stone was made. The uniqueness and softness of the soapstone allowed inscriptions to be engraved in the stones. It is no wonder that the earliest evidence found on the use of soapstone was the inscriptions on the rocks that probably dates back to hundreds and if not thousands of years. It is not known whether it was the Kisii and/or which early people did the rock art inscriptions.

However, it is possible that some soapstone articles were traded during pre-colonial times, as the Kisii were known to engage in barter trade with neighbouring communities.

Items such as smoking pipes were sold to the Luo, Abasuba and the Kuria in local market like Riosiri and Nyakoe.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the idea of earning a living from soapstone carving alone did not exist until recent times. Soapstone was also used to make items of utility such as bowls and pots while bowls were used for eating and storing food, pots were used to store food especially grains such as finger millet and for milking. The Gusii people also made four legged stools from soapstone. These were majorly used in the homestead.¹¹

Eisemon et al state that historically, the preservation of culture was the responsibility of all members of society. However, as traditional ways of life have been eroded by modernity, soapstone carving has acquired a cultural significance which it did not possess before, as a repository of the beliefs, symbols and folklore of the Gusii people, as well as becoming a vehicle of expressing themes of daily life, both in the past and at the moment as will be discussed in later chapters.

Motondi states that the Abagusii's pre-colonial experience in iron working was useful in developing the tools which they used to carve soapstone. Nevertheless, with the demise of traditional industries such as iron working, contemporary soapstone carvers in Kisii use mass produced steel tools such as knives and machetes. Thus from the work of the aforementioned authors it is clear that soapstone carving was carried out in Kisii from pre-colonial times, and that it produced items of both functional and aesthetic value, which today would be classified as handicrafts and artwork respectively . Thus it can be inferred that soapstone carving was primarily done for functional purposes, and that soapstone art production began as a secondary activity which gained prominence later.

The pre-colonial economy of the Kisii revolved around mixed agriculture, in which crops and animals were produced for subsistence, with some of the surplus going towards trade with other communities.¹² The Kisii land tenure system allowed families to cultivate individual plots of land, while grazing land was communally held and exploited collectively.

2.2. Soapstone and Social-cultural Activities

Interviews with soapstone carvers in Kisii revealed that the main uses for soapstone among the Kisii during the pre-colonial era included making vessels to store traditional medicines, and soapstone powder (which was also stored in soapstone vessels) was used to decorate people for traditional activities such as rainmaking ceremonies, and initiation ceremonies, where the initiates were disguised by being completely covered in soapstone powder, as they were ritually considered to be wild animal and hence they were named *Ebisimba* (wild cats).

As one of the renowned soapstone carver, Gerald Motondi, told the researcher that in pre-colonial Kisii society, soapstone was used to make small containers for traditional medicines, dyes, and for making mortars to crush leaves. He explains that the rock art in soapstone found at Goti Chaki and other sites had ritual significance. For instance, carving/drawings of animals on soapstone with arrows directed toward them represented magical beliefs that animals would be killed during a hunt, as a result drawing the image in soapstone.

It is important to note that the memory of traditional ways of life is preserved in Kisii soapstone carvings. Two of the most commonly represented traditional activities

according to Eisemon et al ¹³ are the work of diviners and head surgeons. Diviners were the spiritual authorities in Kisii society. They were often consulted by other members of society to explain the causes of illness or misfortune, under the influence of the spiritual world. The diviner's job was to diagnose the individual's problem and to suggest a solution. Sometimes the diviner would perform rituals to solve the problem, but the active participation of the clients was also required. Diviners were trained from a young age to understand the spiritual world. These diviners commonly used soapstone items such as bowls and pots to carry and/or store their medicines and other tools of trade.

Another traditional activity that has been represented in soapstone carvings is brain surgery, which was performed by traditional surgeons known as *omobari*. The traditional surgeons also used to keep their surgical tools and medicine in vessels that were made out of the soapstone. Their task involved cutting open the cranium either to relieve pressure on the brain, or to set bones which had been damaged as a result of violence. The *omobari* would spend a night with the patient in order to enhance trust, and the operation would be performed at sunrise the following morning. No anaesthesia was used, and so the patient had to be firmly held by the *omobari*'s assistants. After the operation, the patient was usually given time to recover, and the *omobari* would check whether the patient was conscious by unexpectedly breaking a stick, at which point the patient's reaction (or lack of it) would tell the *omobari* whether the patient was conscious or not.

2.3. Access to Soapstone

The Gusii people of Tabaka area had learnt the art of sculpting because the raw material was found within their environment as soapstone is a natural resource within the Tabaka

region. Initially, the stone was easily accessed because parts of the rocks appeared on the surface. It is no wonder that inscriptions of hunting pictures were easily and conveniently done on the surface of the stones,(see Appendix B) the stone were thus easily accessible until the top layer of the rock was exhausted prompting the community to start digging out the rock.

Because during the pre-colonial period, land was communally owned, any member of that community could freely and easily access the stone especially if they were clan members. Men were the custodians of land. They were the ones who handed down ancestral land from generation to generation. Women in the community would only access what their husbands, fathers or brothers land for use. Ancestral land was thus available to members of the same clan who could access it and utilize it. The people of Tabaka could thus freely access the quarries within their ancestral land such as Riamosioma, Bwonsase, Riontita, Nyabitono, Itumbe and Nyatike. Members only looked for people to assist in digging out the stones over some beer in what was popularly known as “Risaga” (Akama & Maxon pg 269). The various quarries were owned by different clans and one could only pay for the stones if they went to a quarry of another clan may be looking for a different colour, quality or size of a stone.

Carvers selected suitable stones on the basis of hardness, colour and size and, also in relation to the determined value of the item they intended to produce. Selection of stones was usually done through visual inspection, flaking and sounding of the stones using an iron machete to determine the strength of the stones. Extraction of the stone involved

hard work and a lot of time. Strong men first removed the overlying soil to expose the needed stone. The stone was then pried from the hillside using iron tools (chitindo). The stone was then cut out according to the required size and shape as well as transportation convenience. Sometimes the stones were roughly shaped into desired items at the quarry to reduce excess weight and as a reminder of the intended purpose. Transportation of the stones from the quarries was done by women and young boys who carried them on their heads to workshops. Big and heavy stones were however carried by men.

2.4 Soapstone Items and Tools

The very first items to be made were items of utility. First the Gusii used the stone in getting powder that was used for many years in various rituals Ceremonies. The Gusii people are believed to have first discovered that the stones were soft and that if rapped against a sharp object, it could produce some powder. The powder was then collected and used in applying on the bodies of initiates when going for initiation. This was to show that the initiates were now in a neutral world because they were neither children nor adults. The initiates kept applying the powder even during the time of seclusion to confuse identification. The powder was also used in a Gusii ritual called “Ribina”. This was a ritual dance that was specially conducted during a long dry spell to appease God and ask for rain. During this time, men and women applied soapstone powder all over their bodies and went to dance at hill tops to appease God and ask for rain. It was believed that after the dance, the rains would resume to allow people plant food crop

The Gusii people later started making items of utility beginning with small containers that were used by young men to carry oil to the grazing fields. The oil was majorly used by the boys as medicine to apply on injuries that they got in the sport games in the fields.

People now started seeing the possibilities of making more items of utility from the stone. Utensils like bowls that were used both for eating, storage of food and as containers of medicine were made. The carvers started making pots that were majorly used for milking and storage of food especially grains like millet, sorghum. The carvers used hand- made tools such as knives to carve out these items. These tools were made from simple iron

The carvers later developed the idea of making smoking pipe “ebibwesi”. The pipes were used by the elderly members of the society to smoke tobacco and (Marijuana) Enyasore. At first the carvers attached a wooden pipe (enchuru) to the stone container. Later, they learned the art of attaching the iron pipe that they got from the Nubians and the Abasuba to the smoking container. Four legged stools were also made from the soapstone. These stools which were almost a foot high were majorly used by the people in the houses (see Appendix B)

2.5. Soapstone Industry and Division of Labour

The traditional activities of women, such as child-rearing, agricultural production and housework are also common themes in Kisii soapstone sculpture. Although women traditionally performed these tasks communally, in most carvings they are depicted as doing them alone, probably due to the difficulty of representing group scenes in soapstone. It must be noted, however, that because of the difficulty of making soapstone sculpture that will meet the standards of fine art, and due to the emphasis on the production of curios, it is only those soapstone carvers with greater experience who attempt to make artistic sculptures which are classified as art. Therefore it is relatively rare to come across soapstone artwork depicting traditional themes, partly due to its complexity and partly due to its diminishing relevance in everyday life.¹⁴

The cultural heritage of the gusii determined the family labour which was based on kinship. There was division of labour based on gender roles where men purchase and carved soapstone while women and children polished the carving and then sold them to the final consumer. However, this arrangement was advantageous to men as they controlled the whole productions process. In situation where women are tempted to carve soapstone they were unable to do so because carving is strenuous and therefore women and children resorted to polishing and marketing of soapstone carvings.

2.6. Other Pre-colonial Activities

Iron working among the Kisii was regarded as an honorable profession, even though it was mainly practiced by the clans of Kitutu and North Mugirango. Therefore there was no stigma attached to being an iron worker among the Kisii, and blacksmiths were free to interact with other members of the community, including marrying them. This is unlike other communities such as the Kikuyu and the Maasai, where blacksmiths were feared, despised and segregated into separate castes, and were not allowed to intermarry with the rest of the community.¹⁵

According to Ian Hodder,¹⁶ material culture is rich with information on a peoples' way of life. If it is put into the right synthesis and correctly deciphered, it becomes an important source of a people's past. Since soapstone occurs naturally in Kisii, the Gusii people did not need to trade to obtain this raw material. Thus it is apparent that the level of skill exhibited by soapstone carvers in Kisii indicated a high level of technology among the Kisii. The discovery of iron and agriculture in most cultures were mutually beneficial, as a secure food supply gave cultivators the free time to develop other skills, while iron tools enabled them to put more land under cultivation, produce and store more food, and

give them more time to develop even greater technical skills. The pre-colonial Gusii had clearly advanced beyond this level, as they were skilled in agriculture and iron working, which enabled them to branch into other activities like soapstone carving.¹⁷

Levine and Levine¹⁸ state that the traditional skills of the Gusii, apart from agriculture, included healing arts, iron smelting and metal work. Iron was produced from the volcanic soils found in Kisii district and used to make farming tools and weapons, some of which were also traded with neighbouring communities. Eisemon et al argue that the technical skills used by the Kisii to produce iron implements in the pre-colonial era have evolved over time into the skills required carving soapstone.

According to Eisemon et al,¹⁹ the early handicrafts of the Kisii were not collected, displayed or valued as art, and they were not considered to be objects of commercial value. However, it is possible that some soapstone articles were traded during pre-colonial times, as the Kisii were known to engage in barter trade with neighboring communities. Nevertheless, the idea of earning a living from soapstone carving alone did not exist until recent times. Eisemon et al²⁰ state that historically, the preservation of culture was the responsibility of all members of society. However, as traditional ways of life have been eroded by modernity, soapstone carving has acquired a cultural significance which it did not possess before, as a repository of the beliefs, symbols and folklore of the Gusii people, as well as becoming a vehicle of expressing themes of daily life, both in the past and at the moment.²¹

2.7. Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the pre-colonial economy of the Gusii people. The economy was determined by the environmental conditions such as land and soil. From the discussion of the pre-colonial economy, the community can be said to dynamic and innovative. Soapstone carving, trade, crop farming and mining as well as hunting and gathering were some the economic activities that provided the means to livelihood. The community has therefore relied on a number of economic activities to survive throughout the pre-colonial period. The next chapter discusses soapstone industry during the colonial period.

End notes

¹Eisemon et al.1988, *Stories in stone: Soapstone Sculptures from Northern Quebec and Kenya*. La Federation des cooperatives du Nouveau-Quebec and The Canadian Museum of civilization. p.15

²Elkana Ong'esa,1971. " Kisii Stone Sculpture." School of Fine Art, Makerere University.

³Eisemon et al. p. 14

⁴Ochieng W. R, 1974. *A pre-colonial History of the Gusii of Western Kenya A.D 1500-1914*. East African Literature Bureau. p. 215

⁵Interviews with Elkana Ong'esa 11th September 2010

⁶Interviews with Gerald Motondi 18th September 2010

⁷Ibid

⁸Ochieng W R *A pre-colonial History of the Gusii of Western Kenya*.p. 215

⁹Interviews with Mr. Elkana Ong'esa.

¹⁰Interviews with Gerald Motondi

¹¹Simiyu Wandiba. 1992 "craft and Manufacturing Industries," in W.R. Ochieng and R.M. Maxon (eds). *An Economic History of Kenya*. Nairobi. East Africa Publisher, p. 18

¹²Ian Hodder,1992 *Symbols in Action: Ethnoarchaeological Studies of Material Culture*, Cambridge, p. 48

¹³King Kenneth. 1977. *The Africa Artisan*. London, Heinemann. p.17

¹⁴Lavin. R.A and Lavine.B. 1966 *Nyansongo, A Gusii Community in Kenya*, Wiley, New York,

¹⁵Eisemon et al p. 47

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷ Eisemon et al p. 15

¹⁸Elkana Ong'esa. " Kisii Stone Sculpture." School of Fine Art, Makerere University, 1971

¹⁹Eisemon et al p. 14

²⁰Ochieng W R p. 214-215

²¹Eisemon et al p. 14

CHAPTER THREE

SOAPSTONE INDUSTRY IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD 1914-1963

3.1 Introduction

This chapter assessed the survival of soapstone industry in the colonial period. The colonial period in Kenya saw the introduction of industrial finished goods that posed great competition to the locally produced indigenous products such as iron tools, pots and soapstone products.

3.2 Early Soapstone Artistic Innovation

The effect of World Wars affected the Kenyan economy especially in the area of exportation and importation of goods as the British colonial government made sure that it only exported from Kenya the important raw material and not industrial goods as it saturated the Kenyan market with European finished goods. It is during this period that most indigenous industries succumbed to the competition and started fizzling out. The soapstone industry however managed to survive through the colonial period¹, especially the interwar period affected the Kenyan economy in various ways.

During the First World War, there was scarcity of major industrial raw materials and food as the countries concentrated on relocating all resources to war. From 1921, price fluctuations set in and the 1930s savage world economic depression saw a total drop in world prices of various commodities. It was under these circumstances that Britain adapted a protectionist policy that was extended to Kenya.²

The introduction of the European finished goods in Kenya led to stiff competition to the locally produced items as already discussed elsewhere. As the locally produced items of

utility got replaced, the carvers turned to artistic production to avoid suffocation. The people of Tabaka progressed to the making of ornamental items, such as chess boards and Alexander Mogendi's celebrated "snake box," which is discussed in detail in a subsequent chapter. Carvers also started making items such as sugar bowls for the mass market. Gerald Motondi attributes the increase of creativity during the colonial period to interaction between local people and foreigners in both cultural and technological aspects. The carving of animal figures was given an added impetus by the success of Akamba wood carving, which was beginning to receive international recognition. This spurred an interest in East African art that continues to the present day. However, Kisii soapstone carvers did not begin to realize the benefits of this interest until after World War II, when international air travel became more affordable and tourist arrivals in East Africa increased. The tourists at that time bought the soapstone items as souvenirs of local African art. This encouraged production of the items at local level as market had expanded.

Eisemon et al are of the opinion that the first commercial soapstone carvings in Kisii were probably done by Alexander Mogendi in the 1930s, at the request of a British district officer in Kisii who commissioned him to make representations of elephants and frogs for use as bookends.³The local people believe that the first white people to come into contact with Kisii soapstone carving were interested in collecting and documenting it as primitive art. Thus a small domestic market for soapstone carvings sprang up, and it was enhanced when some carvings were taken abroad and interest in them increased, thus stimulating demand.

Apparently, Alexander Mogendi fought in World War II, where he met an Italian who taught him how to make sculptures. Mogendi was producing soapstone sculptures from as early as the 1930s.⁴ This shows that the knowledge of stone carving existed even before the colonial times. The Italian might have taught Mogendi the skill of producing new designs just like it happened to other carvers of the time. By the end of 1930s, the Gusii stone carvers were producing a variety of items that were sold to Europeans such as animal figurines like Tortoise, fish, frogs, birds.⁵

The initial response of the colonial administration to soapstone carving was positive, because they were impressed with the carvings, but this changed over time. An example of such a change is when Alexander Mogendi made a sculpture of the crown of the queen in 1944.⁶ He was arrested and threatened with amputation of his limbs. After this incident, he stopped making soapstone carvings until after independence, when he made a sculpture of the First President, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, which is still in the possession of the Kenyatta family. The colonialists thus discouraged creative work, as they wanted carvers to imitate western artwork. The reason behind the arrest of Alexander Mogendi, according to respondents was that if he was skillful enough to carve the crown of the queen in soapstone, then he could easily earn a lot of money and challenge the authority of the colonial government. Despite this, the colonial administrators seemed to appreciate soapstone carvings, and the colonial governor, Evelyn Baring, once visited the Tabaka area.⁷ Baring's visit helped enhance the awareness and marketability of soapstone products in other parts of the country, especially among European settlers and colonial administrators.⁸

3.3 The Growth of External Interest in Kisii Soapstone

Although there is not much international literature on soapstone production, due to the relative scarcity of naturally occurring soapstone, Eisemon et al ⁹ insists that the initial soapstone products of the Kisii people were merely functional objects which were not regarded as art. Apparently Kisii soapstone carving only acquired art status when after receiving promotion by an artist from elsewhere after World War II. Prior to the production of commercial soapstone art, Kisii soapstone carvers “continued to produce functional objects and some of them began carving animal figures for occasional visitors”¹⁰ Its growth as an art is attributed to one Edward Koenigsburger, a Kisumu based German businessman, who purchased handicrafts in Kisii and encouraged local soapstone carvers to produce commercial art in 1950s.¹¹

Mr. Elkanah Ong’esa reports that one soapstone carver who used to sell items to Mr. Koenigsburger was his own father, Mr. Nelson Ong’esa. Mr. Koenigsburger apparently exported the items, especially to his home country Germany and other part of Europe, which generated the interest in them that saw the soapstone industry flourish after independence. Apart from Mr. Koenigsburger, other people who played a significant role in promoting the sale of soapstone carvings, such as Mosei Ouda, who mainly sold to Indian traders, and Roberto Rachamu, who sold carvings to white people. Omonyi Moindi sold carvings in Tanzania, while Stephen Nyabwai and Ombasa Ndege sold them in Uganda and Tanzania respectively. Some of these traders were motivated to move out of Kisii by the end of colonialism, which meant that there were fewer white visitors coming to buy soapstone in Kisii and this resulted in reduced earnings from the soapstone

industry affecting their overall livelihoods. As a consequence, the soapstone carvers had to be proactive in looking for new markets in Kenya and abroad.

Another perspective on soapstone carving in the colonial era is provided by Cosmas Ochomba who was born in Bomware in 1942.¹² He states that he learnt how to carve soapstone in the usual traditional apprenticeship under his brother, Mr. Mogendi. He also contends that when he began carving, at the age of 15 in 1957, the main articles made by soapstone carvers were bowls, flower vessels, candle stands and smoking pipes. However, at that time, the demand for soapstone articles was low, and so there were very few vendors.

The other external dealers of soapstone carvings at that time were people from the Banyore ethnic group of western Kenya.¹³ As the road network was poor and the carvers themselves did not have vehicles, they had to carry their carvings on foot to the nearby town of Kamagambo, where the Banyore dealers would buy them and take them to Nairobi, where they sold them in kiosks. By that time, according to Mr. Onchomba, few Kisii soapstone traders had ventured to Nairobi. This was probably because most of the Gusii people engaged in farming as land were still available. The colonial government also encouraged agricultural production so as to satisfy needs of their mother country. Because the market for agricultural goods was better, the few who went to business in agricultural products thus lacked serious interest in soapstone selling.

Large scale quarrying had not begun by the end of the colonial era, as each soapstone carver had his own small quarry where he went to collect stones. They would ask other members of the community to help them quarry and transport the stones in a communal

work venture called *risaga*, and then the carvers would give them *ebusaa* (traditional beer) afterwards in appreciation of their help. Although each quarry was exploited by individual carver, the land was communally owned by the clan. Therefore, anybody could go and collect soapstone, as long as they gave some beer to the nearest residents of the land as a token of appreciation. This is because the communal exchange economy was still strong at the end of the colonial period. As will be presented later, people only started paying in cash for stones in quarries, after individual land ownership became more common.

European interest in the local soapstone deposits began with the Kiteere Company, which was established at Kiteere in 1936 to mine gold. Three employees of the Kiteere Company, namely Tongi Okeyo, Moseti Orina and Antonine Mosimbiri, introduced the white owners of the Kiteere Company to the soapstone quarrying area in the 1940s. The company began excavating soapstone from the area, and Mr. Onchomba recalls that they once used dynamite in his own quarry, which scared the local people. The company used to pay the men who had brought them to the area, and not the residents. However, all this ended when the company exhausted its gold reserves and moved to the Macalder area near the Tanzania border. One of the men who introduced the white men to soapstone continued looking for companies to work for, while the others started carving soapstone. He claims that his father, Obuya Ndege, used to carve soapstone items such as bowls and plates, while his grandfather, Ogechi Onsongo, used to make *emeguba* (bellows for iron smelting) and *bao* playing boards (ochwa).

Ownership of the quarries was an issue during the colonial era. The colonial government tried to take control of the quarries but that the locals resisted fiercely, led by Joakim

Tongi, who it is alleged that he even threatened to beat the wife of a particular white man. He was arrested and fined 185 shillings.¹⁴ This took place around 1939, and Mr. Tongi paid the fine until he died. The controversy over Government ownership of the quarries is still ongoing, and that in the late 80s and early 90s, Mr. Simeon Nyachae had to intervene to save the soapstone industry, which was at risk of falling into the hands of Asian traders, one of whom (Muhindra) had already bought land in the area.¹⁵

On how soapstone became a commodity, an art dealer from Kisumu was instrumental in marketing soapstone outside Kisii in the 1950s. However, soapstone also had functional uses, such as making slates for schoolchildren to write on. Obuya Ndege, used to make writing slates, which he would sell to an Asian trader named Kasim who lived in Nyakeyo, around 1931. The slates were displayed in shops and sold to schoolchildren. However, no information on the commercial viability of slate making or on the size of the market is available. Nevertheless, the local soapstone carvers moved on to producing smoking pipes, and the major buyers of these pipes were the Luo people, their neighbours to the west. The initial perception of soapstone carving among the Kisii was unfavorable. This is because many people felt that soapstone carving was dirty work. Needless to say, this perception has been reversed drastically in recent decades.

3.4 The Development of Cooperatives

As far back as 1957 soapstone carvers had begun to organize themselves in order to produce soapstone from the same premises. The move towards greater organization of soapstone carving was given added impetus by the visit of the then colonial governor, Patrick Renison,¹⁶ who promised that he would help the soapstone carvers to get markets abroad. He was in the company of the DO (District Officer) who was apparently so

impressed with the work the carvers were doing, that he advised them to form co-operative for easier production and marketing of their products. This was supported by the representative to the Legislative Council then Lawrence Sagini, who recommended the establishment of soapstone co-operatives as they would facilitate the provision of government funding as well as enhancing the marketing of their products.

According to Mr. Onchomba, the first chairman of their soapstone carvers association was Mr. Oroni. Initially the affairs of the association ran smoothly, with the carvers products being sold in Nairobi and carvers being paid according to the number of items each had produced. After independence, the association received Kshs. 90,000 which Mr. Onchomba claims was used to purchase a machine for chalk making.¹⁷ However, lack of accountability led to conflicts between members, and soon the association collapsed and was replaced by another cooperative. The chalk company faced a similar fate, except that no serious efforts have been made to revive it since its closing down. Mr. Ong'esa also recalls that the association received money for the chalk industry, but he says that the figure was Kshs. 65,000, which they received from the Industrial and Commercial Development Corporation (ICDC).

3.5 Uses of Soapstone

The arrival of European goods that came in bulk overshadowed those produced in the local African industries. In the long run, they satisfied the existing demand for manufactured goods in many parts of Africa, and eventually suffocated the indigenous production, cutting off the local producers from the market.¹⁸ Thus, the unequal competition for markets between mass-produced European goods and small scale indigenous manufactured products led to the arrest of the development of the industrial

economy in most parts of Africa. In addition, the makers of traditional handicrafts had no answer to the distribution and exchange systems that arose in the wake of motorized transport and the money economy. In this respect soapstone sculptors were fortunate because they did not have to compete with similar artwork from anywhere else. Thus, before World War I, soapstone was used to make functional items such as smoking pipes, vases for storing food and three-legged stools.¹⁹ In 1916, W.F. Campbell reported that:

“There is a man in Kisii who makes pots out of white rock, several of this pots have been sold in Kisumu”

However, the functional uses of soapstone also diminished as foreign manufactured goods dominated the market in the colonial period. In the course of time, the functional use of soapstone was supplanted by other goods made of other materials. For example, aluminum cooking ware replaced soapstone cooking utensils and vases for storing food. Therefore sculptors had to make other articles out of soapstone. Therefore, they were now used to make art objects as well as functional items. However the amount of soapstone art produced in colonial times does not appear to have been significant compared to the amount of functional items made of soapstone.

Eisemon et al report that soapstone was used in the manufacture of talcum powder (used in the production of painting material) between the first and second World Wars. It was mined in Tabaka and processed by Kenya Consolidated Gold Mines Limited.²⁰ At the same time, soapstone carvers in Tabaka continued to make functional items and to carve animal sculptures for visitors. Tourism had not developed to the extent that it has today, so making soapstone artwork was secondary to the production of functional items like pipes and bowls.

Soapstone carving benefited from the increased interest in African art brought about by mass tourism after World War II. Wood carvings of animal figures were very popular, and it is possible that the practice of carving animal figures in soapstone was inspired and/or influenced by the imitation of animal wood carvings. The preferences of curio dealers, such as the aforementioned Mr. Edward Koenigsburger, may also have had a role to play in the stylistic development of soapstone carving.

Soapstone was not considered a commodity in the colonial era, as the distribution networks were very simple. Carvers were in charge of all stages of production, from the quarrying of stone to the final sale. Thus carvers would physically take their finished carvings to large urban areas such as Nairobi, Mombasa and Kampala. Although this system meant that the production process was more expensive, this was offset by the fact that there were no middlemen involved in the process. However, as soapstone carving became a bigger and bigger business, interest from other parties, such as curio retailers, increased. Mr. Motondi recalls that before independence, two Asian buyers took an interest in buying soapstone. The growth of the soapstone market is confirmed by the similar interest that was displayed by the Kisumu businessman, Edward Koenigsburger, which has been mentioned above.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the soapstone industry during the colonial period. It has been established that soap stone was used for functional and ritual purposes. The making of art using soap stone began when Kisii employees working in white farms and a house hold saw the toys which the children of the employees played with, these employees then imitated the shapes of the toys by reproducing them in soapstone. The World War I

affected the production of soapstone in that there was scarcity of raw materials and food as the European countries concentrated their resources on war. From 1921, price fluctuation started, and in 1930s the world economy witnessed depression which led to a drop in world prices of various commodities. Soapstone carving however benefited from the increased interest in the African art which was as result of mass tourism after World War II.

The soapstone industry that was traditionally meant to make items of utility was now mutating and getting commercialized during the colonial time. It now started coming out clearly as one of the livelihoods of the people of Tabaka in addition to agriculture. The more the people interacted with people of the outside world, the more they acquire skill and improved on production. The increase in demand of soapstone items continued even to the post-colonial period making the carvers improve on the skill of production as well as the types and quality of goods produced was discussed in the next chapter.

End Notes

Oral interview with Gerald Motondi (aged 51) at his home at Tabaka.

²P.O. Ndege & W.R. Ochieng an economic History of Kenya, page 227-229

³ Eisemon T. O; Hart Lyn M.; and Ong`esa Elkana. *Stories in stone: Soapstone sculptures from Northern Quebec and Kenya*. La Federation des Cooperatives du Nouveau-Quebec and the Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1988. p.38

⁴Ong`esa Elkana. 'Kisii Stone Sculpture' School of Fine Art, Makerere University, 1971

⁵ Oral interviews with Zebedeo Ong`esa, 76 years

⁶ Eisemon T. O et al p.15

⁷Ong`esa, 1971.

⁸KNA/DC/KSI 1/2/1916 Annual District Reports

⁹ Eisemon et al. p.2

¹⁰ Ibid p.14

¹¹ Ibid p.4 and 15

¹² Interview with Cosmas Onchomba (aged 69) at his home.

¹⁰R.T. Ogonda, "The Colonial Industrial Policies and the Process of Industrialization in Kenya," in W.R. Ochieng and R.M. Maxon (eds.), *An Economic History of Kenya*. Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 1992, p. 159.

¹¹ Eisemon, et al p.14.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Kisii Court Files 1939

¹⁵ Interview with Cosmas Onchomba and Elkanah Ong'esa.

¹⁶ DC/KSI/1/21 South Nyanza District Annual Reports 1959

¹⁷ DC/KSI/1/21 South Nyanza District Annual Reports 1964

¹⁸Eisemon et al, p. 14.

¹⁹ KNA/DC/KSI 1/2/1916 Annual District Reports

²⁰Eisemon et al, p. 15.

²¹ Interview with Cosmas Onchomba (aged 69) at his home.

CHAPTER FOUR

SOAPSTONE INDUSTRY IN THE POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

4.0 Introduction

This chapter focused on the post-colonial strategies put in place by the producers of soapstone and the Kenyan government to ensure that the industry continues thriving. With the advent of colonialism there was introduction of industrial finished goods in Kenya and other African countries that were relatively better and more convenient to use compared to the traditional items of which soapstone was one of them. Even in the post colonial period the competition with foreign industrial products continues and the government and soapstone stakeholders need to establish measures to ensure sustainability of the industry.

4.1 Modern Perception of Soapstone Carving

There is lack of consensus among researchers in defining whether soapstone carving should be considered as a traditional handcraft industry or as an art form. Langenkamp¹ states that the perception of a craft as either a traditional village industry or as an artistic craft is largely dependent on the viewpoint of the observer and/or consumer. She gives the example of a well finished and designed water pot which is perceived as utility ware by Kenyans, while an overseas tourist probably perceives the same pot as a decorative piece of art.² This suggests that a soapstone article can be either a handicraft or art depending on the purchaser.

However, the United Nation Cultural Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Organization had developed a definition of the handcraft industry which has become widely accepted.³

This definition was mainly developed for the purpose of facilitating trade in handicrafts.

It states:

The term handicraft covers articles produced with simple tools or instruments in most cases peddle powered or handled by the craftsman himself or with no tools at all. The category includes items that often have additional characteristics such as traditional or artistic features typical of the country or region in which they are produced.

This definition has been widely applied in different parts of the world.⁴ Consequently, for export purposes, soapstone sculpture in Kenya is considered a handicraft industry.

It should be stated that in the colonial period, soapstone carvings were mainly perceived as handicraft item as the Europeans purchased them as souvenirs of indigenous African industry. However, during the post-colonial period, there was a paradigm shift to perceiving soapstone carvings as pieces of art. In this regard, it is important to make this distinction between soapstone as a handicraft (traditional industry) and as art, in order to assess how the development of the soapstone industry in Kisii during the post-colonial period has been affected by the perceptions of outsiders. This distinction acquires even more significance from the higher prices that buyers pay for art as opposed to handicrafts. In order to fully appreciate the value of soapstone, this review will examine its functional and aesthetic uses.

4.2 Factors Affecting the Development of the Soapstone Industry

The importance of soapstone carving to the economy of Kisii and Kenya as a whole has already been established. There is a wide range of current and potential markets for soapstone products, both within Kenya and in the international market. Indeed, the

aesthetic value and the commercial value of soapstone have been recognised by connoisseurs of sculpture all over the world. Even though the overwhelming majority of soapstone sculptures produced in Kisii today are aimed at the tourism market, there are also several instances of soapstone sculptures being exhibited in art galleries as pieces of fine art. This happens even though the majority of the soapstone carvers in Kisii do not have formal training in fine art. Although soapstone as sculpture is not produced in large volumes, it is potentially more lucrative to an individual sculptor, as a single work of art sold in a gallery may fetch considerable prices. Furthermore, elements of soapstone items such as bowls, smoking pipes, stools and other products have utility value and are sold especially at the local and national level.

4.3 Soapstone Sculptors and the Elite

In both the colonial and post-colonial era, there were and/or are several local elites who have distinguished themselves locally and internationally due to high quality and aesthetic value of their soapstone art products. A good example of an individual sculptor's inventiveness is provided by Alexander Mogendi⁵, who produced the so called "snake box" in the 1940s.⁶ This was a soapstone box from which the head of a snake would pop out when the box lid was slid open. This design is still popular that eventually copies of the snake box came to be sold all over Kenya and abroad. Apparently, older soapstone carvers tend to be more innovative. Some older carvers hold the view that originality fetches higher prices for their work. One of them said that the price for the "commercial" pieces was lower and that there was more competition. However, various authors also note that innovation is only possible when one has a stable income from

commercial production and possesses great insight into the art market, both of which require great experience, and are therefore the preserve of older sculptors.

One particularly prolific soapstone sculptor is Mr. Elkanah Ong'esa. The sculptor recalls that while he was in school, he would make a few carvings for sale in order to support himself. Later on, he went to Makerere University in Uganda to study fine art at degree level rather than go to study accounting at the University of Nairobi. This is because his interest in fine art had developed while he was a librarian, as he read many books and magazines on fine art. From 1966, he acquired knowledge and tools for soapstone carving from Makerere. He also became aware that a carving could be made around a theme, and that this would increase its artistic value. He then endeavoured to impart this knowledge to other soapstone carvers in Kisii.⁷ It should be noted that Elkanah is currently one of the most renowned soapstone artist and has managed to generate gainful income from the soapstone industry.

Mr. Ong'esa's educational experience has taken him through Makerere University, the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, and McGill University in Canada. However, in addition to his scholarly credentials, he is primarily known as a sculptor and a painter. In the years 1976-1978, while he was teaching at Kisii College, he made a soapstone sculpture called *Bird of Peace*, which is currently on display at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.⁸ He made another sculpture in 1982 in collaboration with John Ndiang'a known as *Freedom Fight*. It represents Kenya's struggle for independence, and it is displayed in the UN headquarters in New York.

His other pieces of art work include a 2 ton soapstone sculpture called *In Search of Water*.⁹ It is based on a popular Kisii folktale in which animals during dry seasons dug for water until they gave up, only for the hare to come along and strike water with his first effort. Mr. Ong'esa says that this sculpture (and the story it is based on) represents the way in which oil companies search for oil and give up prematurely, only for other companies to benefit from their major efforts. He made the sculpture for the Caltex Oil Company in 1984, and a special plane was needed to transport the heavy sculpture to its final destination in the USA.

In 1996, Mr. Ong'esa made a sculpture named *Bottle Dance* for the Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia.¹⁰ It is in the shape of a bottle with people dancing around it, and it is displayed at the entrance of a museum in Georgia.¹¹ Elkana has also made another sculpture known as *The dancing bird* placed at the American embassy in Nairobi. The bird has a flock of birds engraved in it symbolizing the commitment to friendship, peace and harmony shared by the people of Kenya and the United States of America.

Another carver who has benefitted greatly from soapstone carving is Gerald Motondi. Mr. Motondi was born in Tabaka, where he learned how to carve soapstone in the traditional manner at a very early age. He later went on to earn a diploma in fine art at Asumbi Technical Training College, and some of his soapstone sculpture are famous the world over. He has represented Kenya in various art symposia, workshops and conferences internationally, including exhibitions in China, Russia, Turkey and Israel.¹² Mr. Motondi also has the distinction of having some of his work exhibited in the world's tallest building, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. Mr. Motondi is justifiably proud that he has been able to contribute to the promotion of Kenyan culture around the world. He credits his

international exhibitions to his own creativity and innovativeness. He went to China in 2002 for a competition to create a sculpture around the theme, “We are inseparable.” His sculpture won a gold award and he was also given an Olympic torch.¹³ Although he is mainly recognized around the world for his work with soapstone, he rarely received recognition here in Kenya. Mr. Motondi also works in other materials, such as basalt and granite.

The two elites of the community have thus been able to market soapstone items globally through their works that are displayed in different parts of the world. Moreover, they have been among those who have obtained market for the soapstone product in different countries such as the Netherlands, Britain, China and the United States of America

4.4 Commercial Organization of Soapstone Carving

According to Eisemon et al, the growth and survival of soapstone carving in Kisii can be attributed to the close relationship between commercial soapstone carving and artistic soapstone carving, which has encouraged soapstone carvers to be innovative, through the use of observation, invention and resourcefulness. Furthermore, according to various researchers, soapstone carving has progressed in Kisii because it combines aspects of modernity, such as the commercial factor in soapstone carving, with elements of traditional life, such as the forms of social organization and transmission of indigenous skills that are involved in soapstone carving.¹⁴ The authors also state that the social organization of soapstone carving has much in common with other collective traditional activities such as fishing and hunting.¹⁵

In this regard, the development of the modern soapstone carving industry in Kisii is due to the combination of factors both internal and external to the Gusii people. As discussed elsewhere, in the pre-colonial period, soapstone carving was a handicraft used to produce functional items for everyday use. Hence, the development of soapstone carving as a commercial activity is a by-product of entrepreneurship during colonial and post-colonial period, by the Kisii themselves as well as by people outside the community. Thus the production of soapstone as fine art is largely due to western influence, as soapstone carving in traditional Kisii society was never done for commercial reasons.¹⁶ Thus it is fair to state that the Gusii people took advantage of their traditional skills in soapstone carving, and transformed it into the lucrative commercial activity that it is today through their interaction with people from the outside world. Furthermore, as will be discussed below, the people have managed to establish soapstone production co-operatives to benefit from the economy of scale and enhanced marketing.

4.5 The Impact of Chalk Manufacturing

It should be noted that, the soapstone carving industry did not suddenly blossom after independence. Instead, it was the result of a gradual process of evolution and consolidation. However, there are certain factors that played a pivotal role in the evolution and growth of soapstone carving as an industry. One of the factors that influenced the soapstone industry is the setting up of a chalk factory at Tabaka in 1968. The industry was commissioned by President Kenyatta in the same year, but it was later closed down due to poor management, although the machines are still in place.¹⁷ The factory was set up with European support through the Kenya Industrial Estates, and it was known as the Kisii Stone Company. However, the disaffection that led to the collapse

of the company was fuelled by the fact that the local people did not own any shares in the company.

The failure of the chalk company could also be explained by poor policy. The chalk was manufactured in Tabaka, and then it was transported to Industrial Area in Nairobi, from where it was distributed all over the country through the Kenya Schools Equipment Scheme. Even the schools in Tabaka used to receive their chalk from the scheme. This was uneconomical due to the high transportation costs. Eventually these costs brought the company down. In addition, the chalk was mixed manually, instead of using machines, and this meant that the quality of chalk was poor, and so it was not commercially competitive compared to imported chalk products.

The owners of the Kisii Soapstone Factory were also members of the cooperative society.¹⁸ This led to a conflict of interest, internal squabbling and inefficiency, the rent arrears began to accumulate, and eventually the factory collapsed. Despite these setbacks soapstone carving remained a matter of great interest for senior Government figures. Apart from the visit by President Kenyatta, Tom Mboya also visited Tabaka¹⁹ when he was the Minister for Economic Planning. The foundation stone of the chalk factory was laid by Dr. Julius Gikonyo Kiano in 1965. Furthermore, dignitaries such as foreign ambassadors often visited Tabaka because they appreciate the importance of soapstone in terms of cultural heritage.

This suggests that the soapstone carving industry in Kisii could have developed in a drastically different direction. If the chalk factory had been successful, demand for chalk from the Tabaka area would have rapidly depleted the soapstone resources in the area. In

addition, many people would have been employed in the factory, thus diminishing the labour pool for soapstone carving. Thus it can be argued that the closing down of the chalk factory at Tabaka in 1968 was a boon to the soapstone carving industry in Kisii.

The significance of the failure of chalk production is enhanced when one considers the alternative route that soapstone carving took. The way in which Kisii soapstone carving is organized has also helped in its success. Once the carving of curios, souvenirs and mementos for tourists had become a commercially viable business, certain individuals looked further and saw a whole new way in which soapstone could be used to enhance the lives of soapstone carvers.

As presented earlier, the experiences of Mr. Elkanah Ong'esa are instructive in this regard. In addition to soapstone sculpture, he is also an award-winning painter.²⁰ Mr. Ong'esa's main contribution to the soapstone carving industry in Kisii, apart from helping soapstone carvings to be recognized as fine art, is organizing soapstone carvers into the Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society (KSCCS), which has been instrumental in establishing large scale soapstone production in Kisii, as well as in marketing soapstone products abroad, and thus enabling soapstone carvers to fetch better prices for their work than they would if they concentrated exclusively on producing items for the local and/or tourist markets.

After his return from further studies in Canada in 1987/88, Mr. Ong'esa set up a cooperative society, the Kisii Carvers Cooperative Society (KISCO), whose goal was to improve the marketing of soapstone products for the benefit of the carvers. KISCO was set up with the help of the Canadian government, which had earlier helped Mr. Ong'esa

to participate in an exchange programme with the Inuit people of Northern Quebec, who are also renowned soapstone carvers and sculptors. KISCO, in collaboration with its foreign contacts, enabled Kisii soapstone carvers to profitably export their products in the late 1980s to the early 1990s. As a result soapstone carvers were able to improve their standards of living, especially in terms of housing, but they still faced problems in terms of transport and communication networks.

Mr. Gerald Motondi is of the view that the development of soapstone carving in Kisii was given a significant boost by the efforts of Mr. Ong'esa. He states that Mr. Ong'esa had a unique perspective as a soapstone carver from the local community who had studied abroad, and who also had the opportunity of meeting members of another soapstone carving community, the Inuit of Quebec in Canada, who were able to earn a decent living from their soapstone carving. Mr. Ong'esa noticed that Kisii soapstone carvers were being exploited through a combination of mass-produced, almost identical carvings, and the proliferation of middlemen who paid the carvers very poor prices for their work. In order to rectify this, Mr. Ong'esa brought soapstone carvers together for large scale production. Each carver was given a quota to fulfill, and in this way carvings could be produced in bulk for export. Fair Trade Organizations also helped the Kisii soapstone carvers to market their products more widely.²¹

An example of soapstone carvers benefitting from Fair Trade is Tabaka Classic Carvers, who have a standing contract with Crafts Village UK on Fair Trade terms, under which the carvers earn a minimum of Kshs. 500 per carving, and the smoothers and polishers earn Kshs. 8 per item that they smoothen.²² In order to minimize exploitation, the polishers are only paid if they are organized into non-family based groups. Mr. Thomas

Mogendi, a member of Tabaka Classic Carvers, reports that they receive about Kshs. 200 in profit for each item, but he is concerned that the price of soapstone products in the UK is nearly three times the price that Crafts Village UK pays for them in Kenya. For this reason, he expresses a desire for direct access to a market abroad, which would really boost their earnings as mentioned by Thomas Mogendi and Joseph Mogendi.

Mr. Ong'esa was also aware that soapstone was a relatively rare substance and that Kisii soapstone carvers deserved to earn a better price for their work due to its uniqueness in the world of sculpture. He then set about informing soapstone carvers in Kisii of the value of their carvings, and he achieved this through the setting up of cooperative societies, as has been documented elsewhere in this research. Mr. Ong'esa states that people in Kisii did not know that one could study fine art at a higher level, and that his activities are aimed at improving the welfare of Kisii soapstone carvers, as well as promoting the creation and appreciation of fine art.

The post- independent Kenya has seen most of the carvers and venders of soapstone organize themselves into co-operatives to enhance the marketing of their products. There are more than five co-operatives in the area most of which are formed by carver. Initially, carves and venders were selling their items under one co-operative, Kisii Carvers Co-operative. This served them well because they could search for market, sell their items and follow up for payment as a group. This way, they had the bargaining power and it was easy for them to earn a living. When the market went down in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the co-operative member moved out to form other smaller co-operatives to

try and maximize on the profits. The co-operatives still play a major role in promoting soapstone carving and sales. This co-operative spirit has encouraged others to establish self-help groups in order to boost their sales too.

In addition, it is important to note that the first post-independence attempt to consolidate a local soapstone industry in Kisii, namely the ill-fated chalk production factory, was doomed because of lack of local involvement from the grassroots level. Mr. Ong'esa avoided making a similar mistake in the establishment of soapstone carvers' local cooperatives by involving soapstone carvers themselves in the operations and management of carvers' cooperatives, based on what he had witnessed in Canada among indigenous Inuit soapstone carvers. In addition, the members of these cooperatives were both men and women, to accommodate the traditional division of labour which assigned different tasks in soapstone production to men and women.

One could argue that modern soapstone carving does not have the authenticity of traditional soapstone carving. Eisemon et al counter this by arguing that soapstone carving was not a major activity among the Kisii in pre-colonial times, and that the outsiders who encouraged soapstone carving in the colonial era made sure that the objects which they bought were authentic to the culture which it originated from. In this way, the continuity of soapstone carving ensures that certain Kisii traditions are able to survive in the face of rapid social and cultural change, and this is reinforced by the economic benefits from soapstone carving.²³ Thus it is interesting yet ironic to note that outside intervention managed to promote soapstone carving and to preserve Kisii heritage, even

though other forms of external intervention (such as capitalism and colonialism) have been detrimental to the preservation of culture.

Another factor that contributes to the development of the soapstone industry is that Kenyans of all walks of life now appreciate soapstone products more than ever before and so there is a large domestic market for soapstone products. According to Maranga, the market for soapstone products has grown from tourists and expatriates to include local people, not only in towns and cities, but other parts of the country as well.²⁴

The forms in which soapstone sculptures are produced today differ from those of the past. According to Eisemon et al.²⁵ “soapstone carving as done today was suggested to the Inuit and Gusii as an artistic medium by people outside their cultures who purchased craft objects made of soapstone, and encouraged local artisans to produce objects that were authentic to the two cultures. This cultural intrusion has had some fortunate effects. For one, it has provided an opportunity for societies undergoing rapid social change to innovate upon traditions that might otherwise disappear, and an economic incentive to strengthen them.” What Eisemon et al are saying is that soapstone carving was practiced in both communities mostly for functional purposes, and that it was the intervention of outsiders that led to soapstone carving’s present day status as a commercial and fine art.

The soapstone carvers act as a conservatory of cultural themes through their sculpture. Two carvers have come out clearly in the preservation of culture in their carving. Masai contend that there has been a renaissance of activities and interest in the handicrafts sector in many countries, and that handicraft can facilitate economic, social and cultural

development. He states that handicrafts facilitate the preservation and the strengthening of the cultural identity of a country and its people.²⁶

Despite the background which soapstone carving has in the Kisii community, the advent of the free market economy with its emphasis on market forces has led to the weakening of the cooperative movement among carvers in Kisii. Mr. Cosmas Onchomba describes how the soapstone market shrank in the 1990s. Although global economic forces may have been partly to blame, Mr. Onchomba blames the greed of cooperative officers, who began diverting the soapstone buyers from the cooperatives to their own newly founded companies.

The current chairman of the Kisii Soapstone Carvers Society, Mr. Elkanah Ong'esa, states that he got the idea of forming a cooperative to market soapstone carvings from the Inuit people of Canada. Although he says that Inuit soapstone is softer than Kisii soapstone its production and marketing is very well handled by Inuit carvers. He adds that the production and marketing strategies of the Inuit, which were adopted by his cooperative in Kisii, worked very well. Through the cooperatives, the carvers have been able to conveniently purchase stone transport and sculpt, sand polish their wares as well as park, transport finished products and share breakage costs. This has encouraged pooling resources together as carvers are able to get sufficient remuneration for their labor as well as retain their originality.

4.6 Soapstone Sales and Marketing

The major markets for soapstone carvings include the USA, Britain, Italy and New Zealand. The carvings receive wide appreciation from buyers all over the world. By the

1970s,²⁷ Kisii soapstone carvings were being sold in places in East Africa as far afield as Kampala in Uganda, and Arusha, Tarime and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. Some of the people who engaged in this trade are still alive and ascertained that over the years they managed to earn sufficient income from the soapstone sales. At the same time in the late 1960s, Joseph Murumbi, who was Kenya's second vice-president and an avid art collector, set up the African Heritage art centre in Nairobi.

This centre was a major collector of Kisii soapstone carvings, and their exhibitions in Nairobi boosted international interest in soapstone sculpture. In addition, Murumbi founded the African Soapstone Company, which concentrated on the marketing of soapstone carvings both locally and abroad.²⁸ As a result, Kisii soapstone carvers gained a new perspective into how they could market their products. Although soapstone carving is a handicraft, the rising demand for soapstone both internationally and locally influenced Kisii soapstone carvers into reorganizing their modes of production, so that they could produce carvings in large quantities, similar to mass produced goods.

Soapstone carving is also a significant earner of foreign exchange. Soapstone carving is closely associated with the tourism industry. This is because tourists who visit Kenya's national parks, for instance, often see soapstone sculptures and artifacts for sale in or near their hotels or lodges. Tourists can buy soapstone products at almost any tourist destination in Kenya, and they are also available in curio shops in major urban areas. Due to the extensive marketing network of soapstone products, soapstone carvers are able to contribute significantly towards Kenya's foreign exchange earnings. In addition, the main soapstone carving centre at Tabaka is a tourist destination in itself, and some tourists buy soapstone carvings directly from there.

The revival of soapstone cooperatives in the 1980s led to improved earnings for soapstone carvers. At that time, Mr. Ong'esa managed to get soapstone carvers to collect their carvings in a common pool. The carvings were then marketed in bulk, and soapstone carvers were able to make significant earnings, up to Kshs. 70,000. However, Mr. Onchomba doesn't clarify whether these earnings were for individual carvings, batches of carvings, or monthly earnings. Nevertheless, he insists that Mr. Ong'esa was instrumental in organizing soapstone carvers around 1988, as he used to look for orders for carvings, which he would distribute among members of the cooperative. Furthermore, vendors would come from Nairobi to purchase carvings directly from the cooperative, which cut down on transport costs and that led to increased earnings.

Market forces play a significant role in the soapstone industry, and soapstone carving is a major economic activity in Kisii. According to Maranga ²⁹ in his article, "Self-Employed Soapstone Carvers in Kisii," by 1985, there were an estimated 4,000 individuals in Kisii who derive some income from soapstone production and marketing. To date, the number has increased to around 7,000 and is a significant number of people, which probably does not include direct and indirect dependents. Therefore, any change in the market value of soapstone products is likely to affect them, either positively or negatively. Although soapstone carving takes place in many locations all over Kisii, it is mainly localized around Tabaka, the home of the soapstone quarries. Due to its economic significance, it is important to establish how market forces affect soapstone carvers in Kisii.

From the year 1985 to early 1990s business was at the peak. This was because it was the time when the Kenyan tourism industry was doing well.³⁰ This gave an opportunity to the local carvers and vendors to sell the products directly to international tourists without

incurring transport and export tariff expenses. The result was a high demand for the items that tourists bought either as souvenirs or as African art. The high demand for these goods made the local people at Tabaka leave their original co-operative and form their own businesses to maximize on profit.³² People moved out of the Kisii Soapstone Co-operative, either as individual or to form their own co-operatives to market their products as they were more exposed now on how to look for market.

The economic decline in the country occasioned by the national insecurity in the 1992 general election also affected the Tourism industry and international trade in general. This directly affected the soapstone industries that majorly were dependent on the two. The carvers and vendors now turned to self-help groups to enable them secure a livelihood as business had gone low. An example at hand is an Italian, Michele Capir who came to Tabaka in 1988 when business was good and started buying item from Tabaka to sell in Malindi. When business went down in the early 90s, he formed a self help company called Happy Farm. Women groups and HIV/AIDS Widows and Orphans groups were formed in order to access loans and aid to boost the soapstone business which had now become one of the main sources of livelihood.

Kenya`s adjustment to international demands on liberalization of trade and Structural Adjustment Program had a great impact on the marketability of soapstone items. The first was increased competition. Plastic goods from other countries that were lighter and cheaper flooded the market. The goods obviously suffocated the marketing of soapstone items that were rather heavier and therefore were not conveniently portable and expensive. Furthermore, soapstone goods were produced in small quantities and therefore

could not meet the market demand unlike the plastic goods from China and European countries that were produced in large quantities and were readily available for the market.

4.7 The High Demand

At this point it is worth remembering that soapstone products fetch different prices depending on whether they are classified as handicrafts or as artwork by the producers and buyers, with handicrafts being much cheaper. Most of the functional items, such as sugar bowls, ashtrays and so on, can be classified as handicrafts. These are usually sold to local consumers, and they fetch higher prices than similar items made of other materials, such as wood, but they are still cheaper than artistic carvings.

On the other hand, artistic soapstone carvings, such as sculptures of people or animals, tend to be classified as works of art and they fetch correspondingly higher prices. Initially, foreign tourists provided the main market for soapstone sculpture. It is however noteworthy that the domestic market for soapstone carvings is growing, especially in urban areas. The soapstone carvings that are bought by tourists are usually displayed in curio shops. The curio shops normally commission soapstone sculptors to produce a certain number of identical carvings at a certain price. They may even give the carvers samples of what they want. This kind of work is sometimes described as “commercial art,” to distinguish it from “fine art.” Unfortunately for the carvers, this type of uniform carving stifles creativity and lowers prices.

According to Atieno’s study,³³ the advantages of Kenyan handicrafts are that they provide high potentialities of self-employment, they have the ability to penetrate foreign markets, they are efficient foreign exchange earners since no imported inputs are required, and

they generate foreign exchange through export and the tourist market trade. Market forces thus play a role in the livelihood of carvers. The increasing numbers of young people joining the soapstone industry is due to the harsh economic times. The law of supply and demand shows that the returns from the industry will go down. However, there is still hope for soapstone sculptors in the area of fine art.

A closer examination of Atieno's statement reveals the current status of the soapstone industry to be a mixed blessing. Self-employment is a positive attribute of soapstone carving, provided the industry is not flooded with new carvers. Penetration of foreign markets requires aggressive marketing and government support, especially in countries with restrictive trade rules. Thus it is easier for soapstone sculptors to sell their products to tourists in Kenya, as opposed to exporting them directly to foreign markets. The efficiency of soapstone production in terms of lack of expensive inputs is a favorable characteristic of the industry, but this may change if the government decides to tax the informal sector.

A closer examination of the potential of fine art as a source of income for soapstone sculptors is necessary. In order to be classified as fine art, the quality of a soapstone sculpture has to be considerably higher than that of the commercial art. This requires a level of skill that can only be met by the more experienced soapstone sculptors. Nevertheless, fine art production is a viable option for those who are skilled enough to produce it. According to Myers article, "A Brief History of the Marketing of Canadian Inuit Art,"³⁴ the Canadian soapstone sculptors have more experience of producing fine art soapstone sculpture. They initially organized themselves into cooperatives to sell their work as commercial art. In this process, individual carvers were recognized for their

work and invited to give exhibitions, where their art was sold to collectors for higher prices than they could get through their cooperatives. The largest Canadian soapstone cooperative, the Povungnituk Sculptors Society, established a marketing office in Quebec City, which later became La Federation des Cooperatives du Nouveau Quebec (The Federation of Northern Quebec Cooperatives) which continues to market the soapstone sculpture of the Inuit people of Northern Quebec.³⁵

The Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society (KSCCS) followed in the footsteps of their Canadian counterparts. The two organizations collaborated to stage a joint exhibition in Canada, where participating sculptors from both countries were able to get exposure and to sell their art work.³⁶ Consequently the carvers were able to market their productive through the cooperative and increase their earnings.

Furthermore, as stated earlier, soapstone carving has been practiced continuously in Kisii from pre-colonial times. However, the types of items produced and their significance have changed over time. The forms in which soapstone sculpture are produced today differ from those of the past. According to Eisemon et al.³⁷ Cultural intrusion had some fortunate effects that provided an opportunity for societies undergoing rapid social change to innovate upon traditions that might otherwise disappear, and an economic incentive to strengthen them

As traditional culture is relentlessly eroded by modernization, soapstone carving acts as a form of cultural preservation. This is because many soapstone sculptors have adopted cultural themes in their work, such as traditional folktales, legends and symbols. Therefore the soapstone carvers act as a conservatory of cultural themes through their

sculpture. Two carvers have come out clearly in the preservation of culture in their carving Masai concurs with this view. He contends that there has been a renaissance of activities and interest in the handicrafts sector in many countries, and that handicraft can facilitate economic, social and cultural development.³⁸

Despite the background which soapstone carving has in the Kisii community, the advent of the free market economy with its emphasis on market forces has led to the weakening of the cooperative movement among carvers in Kisii. Mr. Cosmas Onchomba describes how the soapstone market shrank in the 1990s. Although global economic forces may have been partly to blame, Mr. Onchomba blames the greed of cooperative officers, who began diverting the soapstone buyers from the cooperatives to their own newly founded companies. He adds that despite this challenge, the production and marketing strategies of the Inuit, which were adopted by these cooperatives in Kisii, worked very well

4.8 Conclusion

The significance of soapstone carving to the economy of Kisii and Kenya as a whole has been discussed in this chapter. There is a wide range of potential markets for soapstone products, both within Kenya and beyond. Besides, both the aesthetic value and the commercial value of soapstone have been discussed in this chapter. Even though the overwhelming majority of soapstone sculptures produced in Kenya today is aimed at the tourist market, there are also recorded instances of soapstone sculptures being exhibited in art galleries as fine art. This happens irrespective of the fact that the majority of the soapstone carvers in Kisii do not have formal training in fine art. Although soapstone as sculpture is not produced in large volumes, it is potentially more lucrative to an individual sculptor, as a single work of art sold in a gallery may fetch considerable prices. Notwithstanding the challenges such as exploitation by middlemen, poor tools of production, lack of structured marketing mechanism as discussed in the next chapter.

End notes

Angela Langenkamp. *Structural changes of the Potter's Craft in Kenya, Regional and Gender Based Disparities*. Osnabruck, Unitatsverlag Ratch Pg. 42-48

² Ibid. P 43

³ UNCTAO Report of intergovernmental group

⁴ Langenkamp 2000, P 44

⁵ Oral Interviews with Cosmas Onchomba 78 years

⁶ Eisemon T.O et al *Stories in stone: soapstone sculptors from northern Quebec and Kenya*. La federation des cooperative du nouveau-Quebec and the Canadian museum of civilization, 1988 P 4

⁷ Interview with Mr Elkanah Ongesa 72 years.

⁸ Eisemon et al 1988 p 22.

⁹ Interview with Elkanah Ongesa

¹⁰ Oral interview with Elkanah Ongesa and Gerald Motondi 48 years

¹¹ The Standard newspaper November 24th 2010 p18 .

² Interview with Gerald Motondi and The Nation newspaper 20th Feb 2012. P 3

⁴ Interview with Gerald Motondi

¹⁵ Eisemon et al p 2

¹⁶ Ibid p 3

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Interview with cooperative members of Kisii soapstone cooperative.

¹⁹ Interview with Thomas Tong'i Mogendi 44 years

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Oral interview with Elkanah Ongesa and Joseph Mogendi 46 years

²² Interview with Thomas .T. Mogendi

²³ Interview with the members of Tabaka Classic Carvers

²⁴ Eisemon .T.O et al p 4

²⁵ Ibid.p4

²⁶ Ibid p4

²⁷ Wafula .S. Masai 1988 "Training for self-employment ; The case of handcrafts in Kenya" unpublished paper National seminar on transitional education, FEF Nairobi p 8-9

²⁸ Interview with Gerald Motondi.

²⁹ J.S Maranga 1985 "Self-employed soapstone carvers in Kisii" Bureau of Educational research ; Kenyatta University p 8

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Interview with Tom Mogendi.

³³ Atieno .S. 1988 "Export marketing : A case study of handcraft exporters in Kenya. Nairobi, University of Nairobi p 43

³⁴ Federation des Cooperatives du Nouveau Quebec "Arctic showcase inc; N.C" FCNQ Montreal, 1987 p 7

³⁵ Eisemon T.O et al p 1

³⁶ Ibid p 4

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Wafula .S. Masai 1988 p 8-9

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPACT OF SOAPSTONE INDUSTRY ON TABAKA: THREATS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

5.0 Introduction

This chapter presented impact of soapstone industry on Tabaka, the threats, challenges and opportunities facing the soapstone industry in Kenya. Although soapstone strengthens traditional forms of social organization, as mentioned earlier, Eisemon et al noted that the commercialization of soapstone production also rewards individual talent and creativity. Sculptors received recognition for their work, but which may also lead to unhealthy forms of competition, caused by the new forms of social distinction created by the wealth associated with soapstone carving.

5.1 Impact of the Industry on the People of Tabaka

The main economic activity in Kisii land is small scale mixed farming which involves the growing of subsistence crops such as maize, beans, finger millet and potatoes. It also involves the growing of cash crops including tea and coffee, as well as, the rearing of various forms of livestock. However, over the year, the people of the Tabaka area have an additional means of earning a livelihood which involves soapstone quarrying and carving. In recent years, as is the case in most parts of Kisii, due to increasing population pressure most of the land has been subdivided into small plots of less than five acres, soapstone carving has become an important source of livelihood.¹ Thus quarry owners are likely to earn a substantial income from selling soapstone to carvers, considerably more than they

would earn by farming a plot of land of the same size. The soapstone industry has therefore significant impetus on the local people as will be discussed below,

Soapstone Production Process as a tool of inculcating skill and responsibility

In most instances, the soapstone carvers themselves do the mining of the stones, as they need to examine the soapstone beforehand to ensure that it meets their carving requirements. Once the carvers have quarried the quantity of soapstone they need, they pay the quarry owner and take it to their carving sites. Soapstone is cut with ordinary handsaws, as well as using double-handled saws, that are operated by two people, they also use *pangas* (machetes) to cut the stone. The carvers select the suitable stones with good texture by inspecting them for cracks and other irregularities. This is done by cutting off small flakes, and hitting them with *pangas* to judge their hardness and overall quality from the sound they make.

After the stones have been selected, carvers usually make rough carvings of their intended sculptures so that they can remember their final purpose. Once this has been done, women and children, usually family members of the carvers, carry the soapstone in baskets to the carvers' workplaces. The entire carving process is performed by men, while the polishing is a collaborative effort between women and children, whereas the process of sales and marketing is mostly left to the women.

The task of polishing soapstone also helps the children to learn how to work with soapstone at a very early age of their life. In this regard, even very young children participate in this activity, which involves soaking the soapstone sculptures in water,

before being smoothed using sandpaper while they are still wet. Afterwards, the sculptures are dried in the sun, and then they are waxed with a mixture of floor and shoe polish. Despite the involvement of children in the polishing process, they are usually given items of lower value, such as animal sculptures and napkin rings, so that breakages, if any, will not have significant monetary value.

Through polishing, children learn about the texture and fragility of soapstone, its variety of colour, how to use sandpaper, the differences in the design of different objects, the procedure that has to be followed in completing a carving, and also how to go about the process of marketing and selling the end products. Older children, usually boys, go to the quarries with their fathers, where they observe the soapstone selection process and learn the qualities of soapstone, such as soapstone with dark brown grains of iron, stones which make a full, hollow sound when hit by a *panga*, and soapstone of irregular colour, which cannot be used. The children also learn of the value of soapstone by watching the purchasing process. Finally, they learn how to sort the overall quality of the purchased soapstone, so that poor quality stones are used to make pieces of less monetary value.

Thus the way in which a child is socialized into the life of soapstone carving is through observation and imitation which is a form of indigenous apprenticeship. Once the children have an understanding of the texture of soapstone from polishing it, they begin imitating their elders by experimenting with carving. These experiments, in conjunction with the practical experience they acquire in all other aspects of carving soapstone, mean that they can become skillful soapstone carvers by the time they reach adulthood. Another effect of soapstone is a culturally enforced division of labour in the soapstone industry,

which keeps everybody occupied. Despite this, the involvement of children may be affected by schooling and laws against child labour.

In addition, the exclusion of women from the actual carving process means that they are *de facto* employees of their men folk. It is hard to ascertain whether cultural attitudes will change to increase women's participation in soapstone production, but this is a ripe area for further research. Mr. Gerald Motondi, a veteran soapstone carver, states that he also learnt to carve through the procedures described above, and he is in favour of children being taught soapstone carving, but he insists that children should complete their formal education before dedicating themselves entirely to soapstone carving.²

The aspect of safety in the quarries is also a major concern as quarrying has led to deaths in various. Onchomba states that there is a quarry at Nyabigena that has killed at least six people in the recent past. However, he states that the Government mines officers have visited soapstone quarries to instruct them on how to mine the stones safely. Nevertheless, the industry still requires additional safety equipment in order to prevent more deaths in future.³

Once a child is old enough and skilful enough to sell their first carvings, they usually buy their first carving tools, which are a carving knife and a *panga*. *Pangas* are used to shape the sculptures, while knives are used to add detail to them. Due to their lifelong experience with soapstone, these young carvers know how to economize by using soft soapstone which can be used to produce saleable objects quickly. In addition, some young carvers may use the income earned from soapstone carving to pay their own

school fees. Therefore, the youth are able to learn skill in carving, selling and prudence in the use of the income they raise.

Cross-cultural Interaction and Use of Appropriate Technology

The soapstone industry has also affected the residents of Tabaka in terms of their exposure to the outside world. People come from different communities in Kenya and others of the world either as tourists or as businessmen. Not only have Kisii soapstone carvers had their work sold and recognized internationally, but there has also been an influx of non-Kisii people into the soapstone carving industry. However, according to Motondi, not all of these newcomers are carvers. Some of them are just middlemen who are intent on earning a profit, regardless of the quality of pieces they buy, and this may adversely affect the livelihoods of soapstone carvers.

Among the people who have moved into the soapstone carving business in Tabaka and its environs are members of the Luhya and Kamba communities. The entry of the Kamba people into soapstone carving is particularly interesting because they originally have a reputation of being excellent wood carvers. However, the depletion of Kenya's forests, coupled with restrictions on the harvesting of certain types of wood, particularly from indigenous trees, means that the Kamba no longer have access to their traditional raw materials for carving. As there is no restriction on the quarrying of soapstone, it is rational and makes economic sense for Kamba wood carvers to transfer their wood carving skills to the sculpting of soapstone. This has led to introduction of new designs and skills of production. Moreover, there has been an increase in skilled manpower in the area promoting production of quality goods.

It is particularly important to state that the soapstone industry has introduced the use of information technology to the people of Tabaka at a much faster pace than would have happened if the soapstone industry had not been present. This is because soapstone carvers are using the internet to bypass exploitative middlemen in order to deal directly with buyers in other countries. Most carvers attributes the improvement in international marketing of soapstone carvings to increasing use of the internet. The internet is a boon to the small producers, although the proliferation of individual carvers is likely to be detrimental to overall prices. It is now possible for customers to send new designs over the internet, which cuts down on the cost of creating samples and transporting them to Tabaka. With the drop in orders caused by the recent global economic recession, carvers have time to experiment with the designs sent to them over the internet. If the time between orders is big, they can experiment with their own designs, so that when orders resume, they have something new to present to their customers.

Other Direct and Indirect Benefits

Nevertheless, one of the respondents, Mr. Motondi, seems to be impressed with some of the more recently formed cooperatives/companies, and he cites two that are doing well, namely Bosinange Jua Kali and Small Art. Mr. Thomas Tony Mogendi, who is the son of one of the first generation of soapstone carvers, is a member of one of the new companies, Tabaka Classic Carvers, which he says is very useful in marketing their products. Thus, despite the risks of industry fragmentation, there is still a glimmer of hope that the latest cooperative and companies will restore the best practice that was the

hallmark of the soapstone industry when the idea of cooperatives was first introduced to the carvers in the early 1960s.

The significance of cooperatives in the growth of the soapstone industry is that, as they were useful in marketing and debt collection. Furthermore, business partners in Nairobi and abroad prefer working with groups rather than individuals. This is because some of the requirements of overseas buyers cannot be met by individuals, especially relating to packaging, quantity and variety of the required soapstone products. Thus organizations such as cooperatives and companies are more likely to have the resources to meet international packing standards.

For instance, Mr. Thomas Mogendi says that Crafts Village UK, which is the primary client of Tabaka Classic Carvers, is looking for new clients in the United States, which, if successful, will improve the fortunes of soapstone carvers. Not all of the carvings of Tabaka Classic Carvers are sold overseas, as there are also local customers who give them orders for specific items.

The soapstone carving industry has also benefitted the people of Tabaka in indirect ways. For instance, education has been improved through the construction of schools from the proceeds of soapstone sales. Mr. Motondi cites the building of Tabaka Primary School, which was financed by the making and sale of soapstone eggs to a person from New Zealand. This project culminated in the construction of a three storey building at the school which was completed in the early 1990s.

Another positive impact is the unifying effect of soapstone carving. Mr. Motondi reports that due to soapstone carving, artists and artisans come to Tabaka from as far afield as

Bomachoge and Bosinange. This helps to reduce inter-clan rivalries among the people that are particularly aggravated during periods of parliamentary and civic political campaigns. In addition, the presence of carvers from different ethnic groups from other parts of the country helps in the process of national cohesion. Despite the political difficulties which have affected the cooperatives, Mr. Motondi is convinced that soapstone carving is a unifying factor in the Kisii region and beyond, as carvers from Tabaka usually go to sell soapstone in Nyatike and other adjacent areas without any problem. Thus it is fair to state that despite the problems within the soapstone cooperatives, the actual business of quarrying, shaping and marketing soapstone has helped to unite the people of Kisii and neighbouring communities especially the adjacent Luo community in Migori County.

With increased scarcity of land in Kisii, soapstone is becoming a major source of livelihood. Soapstone carving was initially done in conjunction with agriculture, as people would work on their farms in the morning, and carve soapstone in the evening. However, with the growth of the soapstone industry, by the 1980s many people had abandoned farming in favour of soapstone carving. However, there are still people who do carving together with farming.

Further, Mr. Ong'esa contends that things have changed drastically since the pre-colonial and colonial period, when the soapstone quarries were a communal resource, easily and freely accessible to anyone who wanted soapstone. He credits this change to the phenomenal growth of the industry and to land demarcation. Once the land on which the quarries are located became private property, the price of soapstone went up. Due to this,

Mr. Ong'esa reports that soapstone carvers are trying to minimize the wastage of soapstone in order to cut down costs.

Soapstone has also become a tool of globalization of culture since the carvers use the items to sell the community socio-cultural values that are expressed in their carving in different parts of the world such as in Europe, Asia, North America and other African countries. For example, over the years, Mr. Ong'esa (who is one of the prominent soapstone carvers) has travelled widely, in different parts of the world, selling the communities cultural values through the carvings he makes. Another renowned carver, Mr. Motondi has also marketed the Tabaka carvings with Gusii cultural values in many countries where the art has been internationally appreciated and recognised.

Soapstone production has also developed to a level that it is being used as a form of international sport. For instance, Gerald Motondi is one of the people who has participated in international carving sport competition in different countries such as China, Greece, United Arabs Emirates, South Korea and Turkey where he has successfully competed with other international carvers. This also helps in marketing the soapstone from Tabaka in different parts of the world.

Furthermore, the industry has also become a major source of livelihood in Tabaka and adjacent areas given that land is getting scarce for the community that initially depended on subsistence agriculture. Unlike in the initial period where the industry was a part-time activity that people indulged in after farm work, currently there are many people who solely earn their living from either being full time carvers and/or vendors of soapstone.

This has helped improve the standard of living of people who could otherwise be languishing in sheer poverty.

Negative Impacts of the Soapstone Industry

It should be stated that the interactions between local residents and people other parts of Kenya and the world at large have not always been positive. In this regard, there are several negative impact that have been brought about by these interactions with people from the outside world. A good example that has been quoted widely is the case of an Italian businessman by the name Capri, who came to Tabaka in 1989. He came to Tabaka from Mombasa in 1989, rented a house, got married and settled down. He ran his business together with his wife. They would buy soapstone sculptures from the carvers and sell them to Italians in Mombasa. The people contracted by Mr. Capri would often fill a 40 feet container with carvings which he would transport to Mombasa. However, the local people state that Mr. Capri lived an extremely reckless lifestyle involving the over consumption of alcohol, smoking and other forms of anti-social behavior that led to the collapse of his business and separation from his wife.

Mr. Capri then started selling a few soapstone items to curio shops. He also had a hotel next to his home. He started a company called Happy Farms, and he would lease land from local landowners. He convinced some local people to buy shares in the company, but he never paid dividends, leaving people to conclude that he had embezzled their funds. In response, they confronted him and threatened to take him to court, upon which he managed to promptly pay them. However, those who decided to remain in his company eventually lost their investment. This case provides a lucid illustration some of

the negative impact of interactions between carvers and their customers, and how they affected the livelihoods of the local people.

Perhaps the most devastating and far reaching negative impact has been the recent rapid spread of HIV/AIDS pandemic in Tabaka and its adjacent areas. As stated earlier, the growth of the soapstone industry over the years led to increased social interaction between the local residents and people from the outside world, and this affected the cultural and social institutional structures of the people of Tabaka. Particularly, over the year, there has been increased loosening of previously close knit family and kinship ties and moral values that safe guarded the people and promoted overall welfare of the community.

In the interview with Mr. Motondi, he recollected that in the early 1980s soapstone carvers were selling their work in places as far as Mombasa and Kampala, where they got infected with HIV. Since public awareness about HIV/AIDS then was not as good as it is now, many of the infected carvers inadvertently spread the disease when they returned home to Tabaka. Consequently, Tabaka became one of the epicenters of HIV/AIDS prevalence in southwestern Kenya.

Although he admits that Kisii carvers who sold their work in other towns played a role in the spread of HIV/AIDS in Tabaka, Mr. Thomas Mogendi contends that businessmen who came from outside Kisii were also a major factor as well. He further states that some of the businessmen who come to Tabaka were immoral, and that they corrupted societal and cultural values to the extent that girls stopped going to school or engaged in early marriages and acts of prostitution. Mogendi also says that this is the main means through

which HIV/AIDS is transmitted in Tabaka, and that the locals simply perpetuate what they perceive visitors doing.

This is confirmed by Mr. Cosmas Onchomba, who relates the way in which the lifestyles and values of carvers changed as they achieved commercial success. Mr. Onchomba provides a lucid example on how he himself and a few other carvers entered into a sales agreement with a man from Denmark called Vezan, to whom they gave their carvings for marketing overseas. Once the carvings had been sold and the carvers got good returns from the sales, Mr. Onchomba states that his colleagues began to lead extremely reckless lives such as excessive alcohol consumption and other vices that probably contributed to the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in the area. He does not provide accurate date when this occurred, however, further interrogation with other local residents indicate that most probably this happened at the time when the HIV/AIDS pandemic was at its apex in Kenya and other parts of Eastern in the late 1990s and the beginning of 2000.

Mr. Motondi states that a lot of people died of AIDS in the Tabaka and Nyamarambe areas, particularly the men and women who worked in the soapstone industry, before Government agencies were sent in early 2000 to sensitize the people on how to prevent and manage the disease, and on the importance of knowing their HIV status. Mr. Thomas Mogendi agrees with this, claiming that the quality of soapstone carvings went down once the best artisans started dying from HIV/AIDS. As a result of the spread of HIV/AIDS, the Tabaka area saw an increase in the number of orphans. Members of the community had to come forward to take care of the orphaned children in terms of food, medical care and education, and even more resources were required to treat the sick and to bury the dead. This put a lot of strain on the productivity of the local people and thus it

adversely affected soapstone production, and resulted to the overall decline of the socio-economic wellbeing of the people.

As shown above, change in lifestyle did not only affect the young generation, but it also the older generation including married people. In this regard, Mr. Thomas Mogendi blames the increase in broken marriages to the changing lifestyles and vices brought by soapstone carving. He contends that once men earn increased income from soapstone carving, they marry more wives and keep concubines to the detriment of the already established family setting. Similarly, women with money, according to Thomas Mogendi, may not want to get married, and so immorality and the number of single parents in the area have increased in recent years. There is particular concern in the wasting of resources on alcohol consumption, drugs abuse and unnecessary luxuries. Furthermore, there is increased number of school dropouts, as children are tempted to purchase and take drugs due to increased prospects of earning more money from soapstone carving.

As discussed in the theoretical framework a livelihood can only be sustainable if it can support a community as well as take care of the matters of the environment both now and in the future. In the case of soapstone industry issues of environmental preservation remain a challenge to the community. Since soapstone as a non-renewable resource areas where quarrying has taken place remain open, posing an environmental danger as they become breeding areas for mosquitoes. At the same time, they became dangerous to the community as the areas may be accidental to the falling of both animals and human beings. Furthermore the waste that remains after carving is not disposed in an organized manner, most of them are left in heaps rendering the limited land underutilized. The

environmental issues, if not addressed will eventually cause more harm in the community and reduce the overall productivity of the livelihoods of the community.

5.2 Threats, Challenges and Opportunities

This section has discussed the threats, challenges and opportunities facing the soapstone industry in Tabaka area of the Kisii County. Some of the challenges relate to cultural perception of soapstone carving a male activity such that women and children are left to perform less strenuous tasks such as polishing and selling of the carved items.

Role of Women in Soapstone Carving

There are other critical cultural aspects of soapstone carving as relates to gender and division of labour that impact the production and marketing of soapstone products. For instance, although soapstone carving generates employment, there is a very strict, culturally enforced division of labour at soapstone carving locations in Kisii, ⁴ where the men purchase and carve the soapstone while women and children polish and sell it to the final consumer on behalf of their male counterparts or cooperatives. There are reasons to believe that such an arrangement is advantageous to men as they are in control of the whole process. These gender based aspects of soapstone production provide a fertile field for further research, which is however beyond the scope of the current study.

Some of the perceptions of gender based roles are deeply entrenched among soapstone carvers. For instance; Thomas Mogendi states that when women attempted to produce soapstone carvings, they were unable to do so since carving is a masculine activity.⁵ However, this is largely a matter of personal opinion, as women traditionally engage in other strenuous activities in the soapstone industry, such as carrying stones from the

quarries to where they are carved. Furthermore, there are concrete examples of women engaged in the soapstone industry, as Thomas Mogendi himself states that some women have earned a lot of money from marketing soapstone.

Finally, the daughter of Elkanah Ong'esa is a soapstone carver in her own right. Thus it is fair to say that the cultural restrictions against women in soapstone carving can be reconsidered, especially with affirmative action policies that empower women and give them opportunities to participate in what has been considered male dominated tasks. This will increase the number of women in soapstone industry. With capacity building initiatives aimed at developing business skills of female carvers the number of women in the soapstone industry is likely to increase.

The Effect of Tourism on Soapstone Industry

The soapstone industry after independence has been profoundly influenced by the tourism. However, the economic might of the tourist market has had adverse influences on the making of handicrafts, including soapstone. For instance, Court ⁶ states that the commercialization of handicrafts, including basketry, weaving and soapstone, has stifled creativity, innovation and originality in favour of improving production and marketing. In addition, the status of handicrafts as cottage industries is under threat, as production is shifting from the home and family towards more market oriented workshops. Ole Sena ⁷ states that churches and missionary groups are at the forefront of setting up craft workshops in rural areas. Although these workshops are set up with the express purpose of generating income to fund educational programs, their impact on both creativity and

on the social structure of soapstone production may be detrimental in the long run to the soapstone stakeholders.

The production of soapstone as a commercial enterprise, to provide pieces for sale to tourists in curio shops requires a certain sacrifice of creativity and quality. Curio shop owners often provide samples of pieces which they would like soapstone carvers to make. This results in a stylized, formulaic style of commercial art which mimics the mass production which almost eliminated traditional handicrafts from the colonial period onwards. Due to the imitation of samples, encouraged by the curio shops, the development of a variety of artistic themes is hindered. Therefore, in order to prevent their industry from becoming irrelevant in terms of aesthetic and commercial value, soapstone carvers need to innovate, and probably to diversify their income by establishing autonomy from the curio shops. The example of Mr. Mogendi mentioned earlier could be emulated. However this does not suggest that the soapstone industry is not dynamic. It has been observed already that the soapstone industry is dynamic, innovative and creative and capable of adapting to changing cultural environments and socio-economic demands.

As discussed elsewhere, another hurdle in the development of the soapstone industry was the introduction of mass produced goods. Soapstone carvers used to produce items with functional utility, such as pots, bowls, smoking pipes, and snuff boxes among others. However, the growth of mass produced goods meant that soapstone carvers lost a significant market for their goods. Other handicrafts suffered in the same way, as plastic bags and containers are effective replacements for baskets and pots. Eisemon et al state that the cultural significance of many traditional handicrafts has also been lost.

Fortunately, some forms of soapstone carving, such as soapstone carving as abstract art, are helping to preserve some of the Kisii community's cultural heritage.

Since 1990, the demand for soapstone carvings has risen astronomically in tandem with the growth of tourism. Although this is largely a positive development, it has negative aspects as well, including stiff competition which has resulted in the demise of producer cooperatives as the main structures of the industry. Instead, they have been replaced by private companies.⁵ This showed that the profits earned by these companies from soapstone do not directly benefit the local soapstone carvers. Moreover, the many private companies lead to compromised prices and the quality of items produced as the companies compete for market.

Among the local people who have formed private companies are former members of cooperatives who were fed up with the political activities within the cooperatives which made production inefficient and less rewarding.⁸ Although private companies enabled a few individuals to streamline their production models and to earn a lot of money, the drawback is that private companies offer greater opportunities for individuals to exploit large numbers of people in the community. This has occurred when the management of private companies take advantage of the relative ignorance of suppliers and employees to exploit them, through misappropriation of profits, paying them poorly, and generally carrying on irregular activities under the cloak of corporate status, which is less open to scrutiny than a cooperative. As a result of the foregoing, many interviewees stated that soapstone carvers in Kisii are actively trying to revive the cooperative movement in the soapstone industry.

The Challenge of Middlemen

The impact of middlemen has also been a continuous problem in the production and marketing of soapstone carvings since the colonial period.⁹ It has become a common practice for middlemen to buy soapstone products cheaply from Kisii carvers, and then to sell them at exorbitant prices in the national and international market.¹⁰ Although the quantity of soapstone being mined and carved is bigger than ever before, the “privatization” of the soapstone industry allow unscrupulous middlemen to have a field day, as they can easily manipulate the various companies and cooperatives, because they do not have a unified strategy on crucial issues such as the pricing and marketing of soapstone products. Many carvers confirm that the disintegration of the cooperatives and the creation of numerous companies were bad for the overall development of the soapstone industry. Even after the collapse of the cooperatives, many soapstone carvers began moving to urban areas to sell their carvings individually.

Unfortunately, they had no marketing experience as previously, all marketing was done by the cooperative. Middlemen capitalized on this situation, going to Tabaka in large numbers to buy soapstone at bargain prices. As a result of these factors, the general market price for soapstone went down. Onchomba places most of the blame on the shoulders of the cooperative leadership, who he describes as ignorant and corrupt (interview with Onchomba and cooperative members). Poor pricing of the soapstone raw material has led to over exploitation without improvement of owner’s life. Mr. Onchomba is one of the old men in the village whose ownership of a quarry near Tabaka has not benefited much. When the researcher met the old man for the first time, he had this to say ‘*Mbuya tore aiga, nenchara yatonyarire*’, meaning “we are doing fine though we lack

food”. The old man owns a quarry that has been almost exhausted, yet all one could see around him was poverty. This is happening in other quarries because of ignorance and lack of support from the government. Consequently, due to poverty and ignorance of the value of soapstone, owners of the quarries are selling the stone as low as Ksh.1,000 for a full twenty ton - lorry of stones. Some of this valuable stones have been used to construct access roads where other ordinary stones would have been used. Middlemen seem to be encouraging competition as they stand to benefit from lower prices, but this trend, if allowed to continue, will bring the soapstone carving industry to its knees. Thomas Mogendi alleges that even middlemen are finding it harder to sell, so they compromise on quality to get cheaper carvings.

The problem of middlemen is exemplified by the experiences of Thomas Mogendi and the Tabaka Classic carvers, of which he is a member. Tabaka Classic Carvers had a business partner named Peter Wahome, who was the proprietor of a firm called Crafts of Africa. Wahome introduced the Tabaka Classic Carvers to the proprietor of Crafts Village UK where they sold their carvings through Wahome to Crafts Village UK, and Wahome would send them the money.

Differences arose between Wahome and Crafts Village UK over pricing, as the proprietor of Crafts Village UK felt that too much of the sale price was going to Wahome, instead of the carvers.¹¹ The owner of Crafts Village UK had previously visited Tabaka, accompanied by Mr. Wahome. Therefore, he wrote to Tabaka Classic Carvers and an agreement was signed between Crafts Village UK and Tabaka Classic Carvers, in which Tabaka Classic Carvers would only sell directly to Crafts Village UK, and Crafts Village

UK would buy directly from Tabaka Classic Carvers. This removed Mr. Wahome from the picture, as he turned out to be just another middleman.

Mr. Thomas Mogendi says that as a result, the prices for their carvings began to improve. The buyers abroad work with fair trade organizations which ensure that the original producers of goods are not exploited and that their sustainable development is accounted for. Crafts Village UK pays them a minimum of Kshs. 500 for each carving, and they send representatives to Tabaka to check on quality, who then pay them and transport the carvings to the UK by themselves. The copyright of Tabaka Classic Carvers is also protected under their agreement with Crafts Village UK.

Unfortunately, the agreement entered into by Tabaka Classic Carvers in 2006 was drafted without legal advice, and it failed to give due consideration to inflation and royalties. This is because the agreement was drafted by the company and Tabaka Classic Carvers merely signed it. The partnership is still on though it has not been revised as per current socio-economic changes. While the adoption of formal, legally binding agreements between carvers and buyers is a step in the right direction the organization for the soapstone industry, there is a need for local carvers to protect their interests by seeking legal representation whenever they enter into a formal agreement with foreign producers.

Policy and Political Obstacles

That the Government of Kenya was interested in taking over the soapstone quarries in the Tabaka area during the 1980s. However they ran into obstacles when they discovered that the land on which the quarries were located was either communally owned or privately owned, and that the quarry owners who had inherited the land from their parents were

unwilling to give them up, regardless of the price offered.¹² In addition, although the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s affected many sectors of the economy, the soapstone industry though affected was able to weather the storm because the industry was almost exclusively in private ownership, beginning with the raw materials, and progressing through the production process and on to marketing. Therefore the economic reforms which affected the public sector had small impact on the privately owned soapstone industry. Particularly, the effects of the SAPs on Tourism and the consequent weakening of the Kenyan shilling affected the marketing and sells of soapstone items.

Unfortunately, another obstacle in the way of the soapstone industry has been political interference. Politicians have tried to exploit or to control the income generated by soapstone carvers. In the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the Tabaka Primary School managed to improve its infrastructure using funds from the sale of soapstone eggs.¹³ However, local politicians were unhappy with this state of affairs, feeling that it would undermine their influence in the area. This is because many politicians like to take credit for everything good that happens in an area, in order to get more votes in elections. Eventually, politicians sabotaged the soapstone egg project. They fomented political infighting among the cooperatives which eventually forced the New Zealand sponsor to pull out, which in turn depressed the market for soapstone eggs and led to dissatisfaction among the electorate. The political rivalry between parliamentary aspirants means that different carvers' cooperatives are associated with different politicians; hence the continuous political infighting contributes to the stagnation of the industry. The local

people need to separate business from politics to avoid political interference on people's livelihoods.

The political battle between various factions of soapstone carvers means that they do not have a unified position on important issues. An example is the price of their goods or the poor state of roads in the area. In-fighting leads to carvers breaking away to form their own cooperatives and companies. While this may benefit them in the short term, especially on the issue of prices, the continuing fragmentation of the industry suggests that soapstone carving may take a longer time to achieve its full potential, and that the vast majority of soapstone carvers will continue to be underpaid for their work, due to the lack of a unified industrial body to speak on their behalf.

The soapstone carving industry is not just affected by local politics, but by national politics as well. Because soapstone carving is closely linked to tourism, the political violence after the 2007 elections severely affected soapstone carvers, especially in the first half of 2008, when tourist arrivals dropped to almost zero.¹⁴ Due to its bulky nature, soapstone is difficult to transport, and the uncertainty caused by the political violence also made it impossible to transport carvings. The political situation in 2008 coincided with the beginning of the global economic melt-down, which affected overseas buyers to the extent that they adopted a "wait-and-see" attitude, hoping that things would improve. The soapstone carvers bear the brunt of these changes, as a significant proportion of their income is from overseas orders. The gap between successive orders has lengthened, and the carvers attest that the production quota has gone down from 6 items per carver to 2 items.

Another aspect of the fragmentation of soapstone producers is the increasing competition between producers, which is largely unnecessary. As soapstone is such a precious rarely found element with no artificial substitute for it. Soapstone producers from Kisii could have a virtual monopoly on soapstone products in Kenya and beyond, if they put up a unified front. This would enable all soapstone carvers in Kisii to sell their products at better prices. The presence of individuals marketing their carvings in competition with numerous small groups also makes life harder for every one of them for they are families which have been registered as groups and companies. The buyers may be reluctant to deal with them, as they may not be able to manage the heavy production requirements of foreign buyers. On the other hand, individuals and small family groups are more likely to fall prey to the machinations of middlemen. Mr. Thomas Mogendi states that with the onset of globalization it is very difficult to control prices.¹⁵ Therefore some carvers, particularly individuals and those in small groups, sell their carvings at very low prices. This forces the rest of the industry to lower their prices in their fight for market share, even if it means selling at a loss or for an insignificant profit.

Limited political will has also affected the growth of the soapstone industry. The often cited example of the defunct chalk factory is a case in point. The respondents mentioned that the Minister for Trade visited the Tabaka area in 2005 and promised to revive the chalk factory, but that so far nothing has been done. Most people in the area consider that this ministerial visit was nothing more than another vote seeking expedition. The absence of political support is also blamed for the poor transport infrastructure in the soapstone producing areas. The respondents argue that an area which produces a considerable

amount of foreign exchange, and one whose artists have brought international recognition to the country, deserves to have better roads.

The carvers blame lack of political will for the difficulties which soapstone producers face in marketing. During the 1980s and the early 1990s, when soapstone carvers were seeking more markets internationally, the Government frustrated their efforts through restrictive measures like export licenses and taxes which stifled their efforts. Ong'esa wrote to the then Minister for Economic Planning, Professor George Saitoti, to complain about these restrictive bureaucratic practices, but nothing was done. Motondi states that by the late 1990s, the organization created by Ong'esa, KISCO, began to experience internal disagreements, and that it started to disintegrate by 2002 as some artisans, started asking for non-existent payments.

The reasons for this are rooted in Kenya's political history. In the 1980s Kenya was a one-party state, and so political opportunities for individuals were limited. However, with the onset of multi-party democracy in 1991, there was room for more players on the political stage. A combination of political interference and leadership wrangles within the cooperatives caused leaders to give up trying to manage the cooperative, on a more active note. However since 1998, Ong'esa has been working to revive the cooperative, and recently, the cooperative got an order to supply some items. He is hopeful that things will improve, and he asks for transparency from the cooperative leadership.

Apart from the political wrangles which have affected the soapstone industry, Debate over control of the quarries and religious conflicts are issues which retard the growth of the industry. Religious conflicts arose over the making of statues, which some Christians

considered to be contrary to their faith.¹⁶ A key figure in the religious controversies around soapstone carving was Mr. Alexander Mogendi. Ong'esa states that Mogendi was a devout Catholic, and that he would make religious icons, particularly of Jesus and Mary. It is this practice which apparently provoked anger among some Christians, who believed that he was contravening the Bible's instructions on idol worship.

The influence of politicians retarded the growth of soapstone carving, particularly in Tabaka. Ong'esa says that, the soapstone carvers received a grant from USAID, which was to be accompanied by a water project for the benefit of the Tabaka area. The local MP, Omweri Kibwage hijacked the project for political ends. He wanted to gain political mileage in the rest of Kisii by relocating the project from Tabaka, to a place where it would benefit his political power base. He managed to do this, but, according to Ong'esa, the water project stalled soon afterwards and it has remained that way ever since. Nevertheless, Tabaka residents are still angry about this because the water project is currently in the hands of the Catholic Church, and they feel that the water does not reach some of its intended beneficiaries.

Even the location for the chalk factory was a polemical issue, as it was suggested that it should be built at Itibo in Suneka, where it was argued that there was more land. This proposal was taken so seriously that a survey of the proposed site was done. However, the people resisted this idea, arguing that it was not logical to build the factory in Suneka, as it was too far from the soapstone area around Tabaka (the main raw material for the chalk factory was soapstone waste from the carving process).

The political rivalries in Kisii hindered soapstone projects from getting priority on the development agenda. When President Kenyatta visited Tabaka in the 1960s¹³, the topic of debate in Kisii was that ‘backward’ South Mugirango, in which Tabaka is located, was getting more attention than other areas of Kisii, and hence more development. The political heavyweights from other parts of Kisii, such as James Nyamweya, Lawrence Sagini and Zachary Onyonka were concerned about this, and as Ong’esa recalls, they didn’t care about art. He says that this attitude is replicated among many Kisii people, who consider art to be ‘dirt.’

The political rivalry between Kisii politicians was so serious that when President Kenyatta made a subsequent visit to Kisii, they conspired to keep him away from Tabaka. The President recalled Tabaka from an earlier visit, but the Kisii politicians in his entourage made sure that he didn’t stop, as there were no other attractions in Kisii that could compare to soapstone. When the President specifically mentioned Tabaka, they had already left it far behind.

During the Moi era, soapstone carving benefited from the awareness that was created about soapstone. However, these benefits were soon undone by the political fragmentation of Kisii that occurred later in the Moi regime. People were in favour of Kisii being split into many districts as it meant better service delivery and greater opportunities for economic growth. However, the new districts entrenched the rivalries among Kisii politicians. The then South Mugirango MP, was allied to Zachary Onyonka, who was opposed to the development of the soapstone industry. He stifled the development of a project in which soapstone was to be mixed with banana fibres to make paper. Thus the bias against South Mugirango by most Kisii politicians ended up hurting

not only South Mugirango, but the rest of Kisii as well, as the banana leaves in the project would have come from all over Kisii, and not from South Mugirango alone.

About the soapstone egg project, which resulted in the improvement of Tabaka Primary School, Ong'esa insists that politicians were unhappy with it from the start, as they were not part of it and so they couldn't claim any credit. Plainclothes officers from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) were sent to live in Tabaka and to investigate the source of funding for the school construction. On March 11, 1991, Ong'esa and his associates in the soapstone egg project were all arrested and taken to Nyamarambe, where they were kept in a cell for 18 hours.¹⁷ They were then taken before a panel that included Kombo and the local District Officer (DO). The DO maintained that they had an illegal source of funding for the school construction, while Kombo stated that they were being funded by foreigners to overthrow the Government. Fortunately, the political situation in Kenya was tense in the aftermath of the murder of a leading Government critic, Archbishop Alexander Muge, and so they were released.

Political interference may also extend to matters of policy. For instance, in the recent past, efforts have been made to restructure the educational curriculum, which many teachers and students had complained was overloaded. As a result, certain subjects were sacrificed, and the arts were the major casualties. Elkanah Ong'esa decries this state of affairs, saying that this represents Kenyans lack of value for art. He adds that the decision to remove arts and agriculture from the curriculum was made soon after independence, and that this adversely affected the quality of soapstone production.

Finally, the level of exploitation in the soapstone industry has prevented it from growing to its full potential. Although some of this exploitation is the result of middlemen taking advantage of the competition within the industry, some of it is due to the insufficient development of markets for some goods. A case in point is the price of soapstone powder, which owners of the quarries sell for as little as Kshs. 5,000 per 40 feet container, before it is taken elsewhere to manufacture paint and talcum powder.

5.3. Conclusion

Economically, the tourist market has been found to have had adverse effect on the making of handcraft including soapstone. Beside, middle men continue to pose challenges in the marketing of soapstone item, for they buy soapstone products cheaply from the carvers and then sell them at high prices on the international market. Consequently the general market of soapstone has gone down due the challenges the industry is facing. Another challenge is the way the soapstone industry has been political interfered with by local politicians who have exploited or controlled the income generated by soapstone carvers, thwarting the development of soapstone industry. Besides, the insufficient development of market for soapstone items has partly contributed to slow expansion of the industry. However, the carvers have not given up despite the many challenges they face.

End Notes

¹Thomas Motondi Interviews

²Eisemon et al, p. 6

³Oral Interviews with Cosmas Onchomba 78 years

⁴ Elsbeth Court, "Themes in Kenyan Children's Art," Society for Research in Child Development, Baltimore, 1987.

⁵Interviews with Thomas Mogendi and Joseph Mogendi

⁶ Court, Elsbeth, "*Themes in Kenyan Children's Art,*" *Society for Research in Child Development, Baltimore, 1987.*

⁷Sarone Ole Sena, *Pastoralism and Education*, Ph.D dissertation, McGill University, 1986.

⁸Langenkamp p.77 and 145

⁹ Levine R A Wealth and power in Gusii landin Boherrmes P& Dalton D.(ed) *Markets in Africa. North western university Press1962.*

¹⁰Interview with Gerald Motondi and Nyabigena carvers.

¹¹Interviews with Thomas Mogendi

¹²Gerald motondi and Elkanah Ong'esa

¹³Interviews with Gerald Motondi and Ombasa, Ongesa

¹⁴Interviews with Thomas Mogendi

¹⁵Interviews with Ombasa and Onchomba

¹⁶KNA/DP/33/5 District annual Report 1965

¹⁷Interviews with Cosmas Onchomba, Ongesa, Joseph Mogendi.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

6.0 Introduction

This section provides way forward and conclusion of the study based on the historical context of the development and evolution of the soapstone industry in Tabaka. The chapter highlights the various ways in which the soapstone industry can be improved in order to sustainably improve the living standards and economic development of the people of Tabaka area and the Kisii region in general.

6.1 Conclusion

The study provides a systematic analysis of the development and historical evolution of the soapstone industry in the Tabaka area. The research established that during the pre-colonial period, the people of Tabaka produced soapstone items such as bowls, pots, stools, clabs, smoking pipes that had utility value and enhanced their livelihoods. The people exchanged these utility items with their neighbours in South western Kenya including the Luo, Kuria and suba. In return the people received other forms of utility items such as hoes, machetes, salt, beef and milk.

The study shows that during the colonial period, there were major changes in the production and marketing of soapstone goods as a result of introduction of European goods that were mass-produced and served various purposes. The mass produced goods included steel products and plastic goods that replaced the soapstone products. With increased influence of Western lifestyles and entrenchment of capitalism the local people increasingly depended on mass-produced goods from the Western world. These livelihood changes brought major transformation in the production of indigenous soapstone products. Particularly, there was transformation from the production of soapstone items that had utility value to the production of non-utility artistic items that were mainly sold to foreigner as artistic products that mainly served aesthetic and amusement value. The non-utility soapstone items included carvings of wild animals, human imitations and other artistic items that represented various forms of nature and other forms of abstract art that suited the interests and aesthetic values of the Western world.

It should be stated that to a certain extent the local people produced new forms of soapstone items that had utility values based on existing societal demands. Examples of these items included flower vases, sugar dishes and bowls. However, in the overall, during the colonial period, the soapstone industry did not experience much development due to colonial policies that discouraged the production and development of indigenous industries. The colonial policies mainly supported the importation of western goods and services. Furthermore, European colonial policies were aimed at encouraging the production of agricultural crops and other forms of raw materials for Western industries whereas the local people of Tabaka and other parts of the country provided markets for European mass- produced goods.

In the post-colonial period there was gradual change of government policies that had direct impact on the soapstone industry. For instance the restrictions that were imposed by the colonial government in local production were removed. This provided individual freedom and encouraged the production and marketing of soapstone production. Particularly, there was increased production and marketing of soapstone carvings as the Kenyan tourism industry expanded from the 1970s. Furthermore, the government encouraged the exportation of soapstone carvings to the outside world especially to Europe and North America.

In this regard, in recent years, external market forces and processes of globalization have had major influence on the Tabaka soapstone industry, particularly in the forms of artistic items that are specifically produced to suit the needs and expectations of the rapidly changing globalized world market. For instance, due to extreme competition from Chinese and other Asian products such as plastic toys and internal household decorations that have flooded the local and international market, the soapstone producers have started producing new items that are appropriate to existing market demands such as the production of items that are lighter and smaller in size. The soapstone carvers have also adapted unique forms and designs that appeal to different market needs. Furthermore, due to changing market demands and increased competition, the people of Tabaka have formed co-operatives that are promoting group production and marketing of soapstone goods. Also, the local people have adapted modern skills of marketing their goods in different parts of the world through internet and other forms of electronic technologies such as electronic communication and money transfer.

The study has clearly demonstrated that a critical feature of the soapstone industry is the local people's resilience in the development of the industry as a sustainable form of livelihood capable of withstanding internal and external challenges. Thus, the industry has over the years managed to survive and adapt to changing conditions and demands due to the uniqueness of the soapstone products and the adaptive skills and innovations of the local people that responded to changing socioeconomic and cultural needs. As a consequence, unlike other forms of indigenous industries that were unable to withstand forces of colonialism and Western capitalism, the soapstone industry still flourishes and has great potential in making significant contribution in the promotion of sustainable livelihood of the local people.

6.2 Recommendation

Notwithstanding the various problems and challenges confronting the industry such as lack of appropriate technology, leadership wrangles, exploitation by middlemen, gender bias, environmental degradation, lack of modern marketing strategies and the recent spread of HIV-AIDS among soapstone carvers, this research contends that the future of the soapstone industry is relatively bright if a number of appropriate measures and strategies are initiated for long term sustainability as contained in the following recommendations:

- i. Establishment of entrepreneurial centers for the training and development of soapstone industry artisans. These centers will help train and develop the artisans on how to design, produce and market soapstone products. The centres should also provide basic skills on book keeping and financial management techniques. These should be aimed at empowering the soapstone carvers on how to manage

their income and other financial returns, and also be able to keep proper books of accounts. Furthermore, they should also be trained to be able to use basic computer design skills to produce products for specific markets.

- ii. The carving of soapstone has contributed to environmental degradation and pollution. There is therefore need to create awareness on how soapstone remains can be recycled as a way of limiting continuous excavation of soapstone, which has interfered with the landscape of the area.
- iii. The number of female soapstone carvers is smaller compared to that of their male counterparts. There is therefore need to sensitize and empower women financially and through capacity building initiatives so as to increase the number of female carvers.
- iv. A growing number of soapstone carvers have been decimated by HIV/AIDS. There is therefore need to intensify measures to curb the rate of infection of the virus among the carvers.
- v. There is also need for improved transport and communication network in the area. Soapstone is a major foreign exchange earner in the country. There is therefore need to have such a productive area accessible to both local and international traders and tourists through the improvement of transportation infrastructure such as roads. Also, the nearby Suneka Airstrip should be improved to allow easy and efficient access to the Tabaka area and adjacent region in south- western Kenya.
- vi. There is also need for the government to support this industry that is a major foreign exchange earner. The government should support the producers by providing them with modern tools of work as well as a robust tertiary level

education that will boost the quality of soapstone production. For instance, Hany Faisal who is a renowned art scholar in Egypt contends that the lack of modern equipment limits Kenyan carvers to small sized carving that generated little income “ In Egypt, use of advanced technology helps artists to come up with big valuable sculptures” (nation newspaper 29/Aug/2011 Pg 19)

- vii. Soapstone producers in Kisii should organize themselves into strong cooperative. The initiative has already been taken by the Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society (KSCCS). An effort should be made to ensure that all soapstone carvers, including those who are just joining the industry become members of the cooperative. In this way soapstone carvers will be able to negotiate better prices for their products, and eliminate the possibility of individual carvers undercutting the rest, which is detrimental to all soapstone carvers in the long run.
- viii. The Kisii Soapstone Carvers Cooperative Society (KSCCS), in collaboration with the government, should make its presence felt in the international market, through trade fairs and advertising. Currently, soapstone producers are competing with each other for the limited number of tourists who come to the country. A few producers cater exclusively to the local market. Both the tourist and local markets will not generate sufficient demand to exhaust the available supply. Thus by directly exporting to foreign markets, as opposed to waiting for tourists to come here, the market will expand and demand will increase. Since Kenya has recently been vulnerable to travel advisories by western governments warning their citizens against coming to Kenya, the option of direct marketing of soapstone abroad will circumvent political development at home and abroad.

- ix. It is also important for the relevant government industries, such as Trade and Industry, as well as cultural and social services, and tourism, to conduct exhibition locally to promote awareness of the variety of soapstone sculpture being produced in Kisii. This would emulate the efforts of the Canadian soapstone carvers, who set up an office in a big city to promote their work. Such an arrangement will increase the opportunities for soapstone sculptors to be invited to exhibitions abroad. Just as there has been a campaign to promote local tourism, a similar campaign for local arts and craft, including soapstone, could have positive effect for soapstone carvers.

- x. There is need for the enactment of a draft policy and clear legal framework to protect the soapstone carver from blatant exploitation by unscrupulous middlemen and women, businessmen and investors. This legal frame should be particularly drafted in a main aim of protecting the social and economic interests, innovativeness and creativity of the soapstone carvers. Specifically, there should be a clear legal channel to protect the cope rights and patenting to protect the unique carvings from blatant infringement in the production, marketing and sales rights of the local people.

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INTERVIEWS

Thomas Tong`i Mogendi; Chairman Tabaka Classic Carvers, 43 years, 11-10-2010

Jason Ondari; T.C.C. 50 years, 11-10-2010

Simeon Otondi; 55 years, carver, 11-10-2010

Rodert Mochama; 45 years, carver, 11-10-2010

Joseph Mogendi; member T.C.C. 41 years, 11-10-2010

Shem Mogendi; 48 years, carver, 11-10-2010

Cosmas Onchomba Abuya; Quarry owner, 67 years, 11-10-2011

Pius Ondari; 55 years, carver.13-10-2010

Chrisandus Nyabuto; carver 13-10-2010

David Mauti; 55 years carver 13- 10-2011

Isaac Mogendi; Vender, 58 years, 18-10-2011

Json Mekubo, 60 years Quarry owner, 18-10-2011

Simeon k. Ombasa; 60 years, Vender 18-10-2011

Michele Capri; Italian vender, 60 years, 18-10-2011

Ombaba Nyakangi; 65 years, Quarry owner, 18-10-2011

Samson Nyagiro Mogendi, Quarry owner, 62 years, 27-10-2011

Ogaro Kibego; 62 years, Carver, 27-10-2011

John Omonyi Moinde, 70 years, quarry owner, 27-10-2011

Nathan Mirienyi; 63 years, Quarry owner, 27-10-2011

James Omwango; 63 years, 27-10-2011

Paul Ong'esa; 63 years, Carver, 27-10-2011

Ambrose Ong'esa; 65 years, carver, 27-10-2011

Ong'esa Omwange, 65 years, Carver, 27-10-2011

Joakim Tong'i; vender, 50 years, 27-10-2011

Alexander Mogendi; carver, 51 years, 7-11-2011

Gabriel Mogendi; 54 years, 7-11-2011

Joakim Tong'i Migiro; vender, 45 years, 27-10-2010

Ignetius Motondi; 53 years, Chairman, KISCOP, 7-11-2011

Joel Ombasa Ong'esa; Chairman KISOP Cooperative, 65 years, 8-11-2010

Samson Nyagiro Mogendi; Carver, 62 years, 16-11-2010

Stanley Mochama, 47 years, Carver, 16-11-2011

Ogao Ogato; 48 years, Carver, 16-11-2011

Miruka Mochama, 60 years, 16-11-2010

Gerald Motondi; Carver, 45 years, 16-11-2010

Geofry Ogetonto; Carver, 35 years, 27-11-2010

Obed Nyayiemi; Carver, 43 years, 27-11-2010

Elkanah Ong'esa; Professional carver, 70 years, 2-12-2010

Peter Ochumi, Carver, 33 years, 3 -12-2010

Paul Magori; 30 years, Carver, 3-12-2011

Belten Ong'esa; 30 years, carver, 3-12-2011

Ribon Ombasa; 29 years, Carver, 3-12-2011

Mochama Kenyanya; 30 years, carver, 3-12-2011

Justus Okoyo; 28 years, Carver, 3-12-2011

Ontita Mosumari; 28 years, Carver, 3-12 2011

Stanley Onderi, Secretary, SMOLART Cooperative, 39 years, 3-12-2011

Ignatius Motondi, 53, Chairman, KSICOP

Pamela Kemunto; Carver, 35 years, 15-12-2010

Penina Simeon, Carver, 47 years, 15-12-2011

Pamela Nyang'ate, 38, vender, 15-12-2011

Morara Omonyi, 32, Carver, 15-12-2011

James Ong'esa, 37, carver, 15-12-2011

Alfred Ong'esa, 29, Carver, 15-12-2011

Tom Ogoro, 52, Carver, 15-12-2011

Robert Onywoki; Vendor, 35 years, 17-12-2011

Nyangaresi Ogoro, 53, carver, 17-12-2011

Mauti Ndege, 52, vender, 17-12-2011

Maurice Nyagwanga, 51, 17-12-2011

David Mauti, 50, vender, 16-12-2011

Lawrence Otondi; 55, vender, 18-12-2011

Robert Rachani; 45, carver, 18-12-2011

John Orina; 57, Carver, 18-12-2011

Ogao Oswago; 42, Carver, 18-12-2011

Morara Nybita; 42, Carver, 18-12-2011

Ong'esa Mirienyi; 51, Vender, 18-12-2011

Ogwanku Ombati; 48, Carver, 19-12-2011

Mary Nyabuti; 42, Vender, 19-12-2011

Mong'ina Ong'uti; 45, Vender 19-12-2011

Risper Kegoro; 39, Vender, 19-12-2011

Ogao Oinde; 35, member of Bomware Chabumba Women Group.

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APPENDIX A:

QUESTIONNAIRE AND ORAL INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

ON “THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOAPSTONE INDUSTRY IN KISII AREA OF KENYA. A CASE STUDY OF KISII BETWEEN 1895-1990”

RESEARCHER: MALLION K. ONYAMBU

TOPIC: THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOAPSTONE INDUSTRY IN KISII AREA OF KENYA: A CASE STUDY OF KISII BETWEEN 1895-1990

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH: PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY OF MOI UNIVERSITY

Matters to Note

- *The information given on this questionnaire will be held in strict confidence and will be used only for the purpose of study*
- *If any of the questions may not be appropriate to your circumstances, you are under no obligation to answer.*
- *You are requested to answer the questions below to the best of your knowledge. All answers to questions below will be treated with a lot of confidentiality and at no time the researcher quotes your answers verbatim.*

1. Personal Information

Date of Interview _____

Name of Respondent _____

Sex _____

Marital Status _____

Division _____

Location _____

Sub- Location _____

Clan _____

Village _____

2. The pre-colonial soap stone industry

Where is soapstone found in this area?

When did soapstone mining begin in this area?

Which person/group of persons initiated soapstone mining in Kisii?

Which person/group of persons initiated soapstone sculpture in Kisii?

Apart from sculpture, what was soapstone used for in traditional Kisii society?

Which communities did the Kisii sell their soapstone sculpture to?

What did they receive in return?

Were people from other communities more interested in soapstone utensils or in soapstone artwork?

3. To document the uses of various soapstone sculptures

What were the household uses of soapstone sculptures in the past?

Was soapstone used for art/decorations in the past?

What is soapstone used for today?

Do people buy more soapstone art work or do they prefer functional items (plates, ashtrays, smoking pipes and so on)?

Where are the majority of soapstone sculptures used? Within Kisii or elsewhere?

4. To account for the factors that influenced the changes in the uses of soapstone

When did soapstone carvers in this area start selling their work for money instead of bartering it?

Did you sell more soapstone products before independence or after independence?

Did you (or anyone you know) sell soapstone to tourists before independence?

What kind of sculpture (art work or utensils) do tourists prefer?

Have you ever received an order from a curio shop?

Where are the curio shops who give orders for soapstone located?

Do you get more money if you sell your soapstone products here, or if you sell them in major towns?

How much do curio shops pay per sculpture?

Who pays more: curio shops in major towns, or tourists who come to buy here?

5. To determine the effects of market forces on soapstone industries

Do you get competition from other handicrafts (basketry, pottery, leatherwork, wood carving)?

How many people practice soapstone carving in this municipality?

Are there more or fewer soapstone carvers than in the past?

If the number of carvers increases, how does this affect the price of soapstone at the quarry?

If the number of carvers increases, how does this affect the price at which you sell to tourists?

At what time of the year do you receive most tourist customers?

6. To assess how the carving has impacted on the culture of the local community

Has the soapstone industry affected your culture in any way?

Has your life improved or worsened since you join soapstone industry?

On average, is soapstone industry a viable employment?

Is there any gender roles specifically associated with the soapstone industry?

What role do men play?

What role do women play?

Did these gender roles exist at the start of the soapstone industry, or were they introduced later?

Are these gender roles fair to people of all genders?

7. To make recommendations on how to improve the soapstone industry in

Kisii.

What do you suggest should be done to improve the soapstone industry?

**APPENDIX B: PICTURES SHOWING THE EVOLUTION OF SOAPSTONE
CARVING**



Drawing of a mysterious creature on soapstone rock



A pellet for mixing Red ochre in pre-colonial Gusii



Bao game.

Traditional utility items : smoking pipe, bowls and pots.



Modern artistic items: from left flamingo carving, statue of Mary, Chicken, eggs, Flower vase and a carving symbolizing unity.



Animal carvings: Giraffes, Lion and Fish.



Carving symbolizing “community interdependence”



Motondi receiving Olympic torch award in Beijing
from Xia Sajin Vice president of OFA 2008



From left : Mr Elkanah Ong’esa “ re-known sculptor”, Former USA ambassador to Kenya Michael Ranneberger and Gerald Motondi “ sculptor” at the soapstone carving site.

Tribute to peace

The dancing birds spreading peace around the world

It takes nine months of intensive labour to give the birds the wings to fly from the quarries of Kisii to the glamour of Gigiri, where it is centrepiece of art

By KIUNDU WAWERU

The soothing sounds of flute fused with *nyatiti* floated through the sunny afternoon, like a spray of breeze from the sea, if one could substitute blue colour with the surrounding greenery.

Imagination, after all, was the theme of the day, epitomised in the imposing granite rock carved in the shape of a massive bird – 30 tonne in all, and standing ten feet tall, then deposited at the entrance of the US Embassy in Nairobi’s Gigiri area.

This was the gift to the United States by renowned sculptor, Elkanah Ong’esa, and unveiled last Sunday by the US ambassador Michael Ranneberger. The Minister for National Heritage and Culture William Ole Ntimama was there, too, as was the Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission director PLO Lumumba, among other dignitaries.

Singer Ayub Ogada enthralled with *Koth-Biro*, the Academy-nominated composition that featured in the movie, *The Constant Gardner*, as did Grand Master Masese with his stringed instru-

ELKANA ONG’ESA BIODATA

Elkana Ong’esa’s bronze monument, *Her Mother*, is permanently displayed at the World Sculpture Park Chang Chun City in North Eastern China.

Another piece is at the UN Headquarters New York, The Coca-Cola Olympics Museum in Atlanta Georgia and at the Caltex Oil company offices in Houston, Texas among others.

Among his trainees is Gerard Motondi, who made the prize-winning *Irseparabile*, a Kisii stone sculpture at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, and Target 2007, at the Buirji Khalifa Towers, Dubai, the tallest building in the world.

which to display the bird,” he says. Ong’esa adds that the US Embassy, being interested in the peace process in Kenya, supported the idea. “With the help of other artists, we started work on the dancing bird, working from Kisii. It took us about nine months and finally, in February this year, the bird found its way to the US Embassy.”

The masterpiece that Elkana Ong’esa (inset) developed for nine months, and launched at the weekend by US ambassador. (PHOTOS: MBUGIA KIBERA)

ing *Obokano*, while other species of birds are dancing is because there is peace. This is the message to Kenyans, and indeed, to other nations that instead of artists like Picasso, Matisse, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Modigliani were in-

Murungi, who



A piece of Elkanah’s work at the USA Embassy in Nairobi.

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