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INDIGENOUS FOOD PRODUCTION AMONG THE ABAGUSII IN THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

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ABSTRACT :

This paper examines indigenous food production in pre-colonial Gusiiland, focusing on how crop cultivation, livestock keeping and wild food sustained household and community life. Food production shaped social organisation by influencing land use, labour relations, settlement patterns and barter trade with neighbouring communities. Guided by the Mode of Production Theory, the study situates food production within the social and economic arrangements that governed access to land, labour allocation and food storage. A historical research design was adopted, drawing on oral interviews with 38 informants selected through purposive and snowball sampling in Kisii and Nyamira counties, alongside secondary sources such as books, journal articles and theses. Through descriptive data analysis, thematic patterns emerged, demonstrating how indigenous food production developed and was systematically organised in the pre-colonial period. The study traces the development of indigenous food production from their migration from the Mythical Misri and settlement in Gusiiland around 1850 where they establishment mixed farming which included finger millet, sorghum, livestock and wild foods. Findings demonstrate that agricultural activities were guided by knowledge of the environment including seasonal cycles, rainfall patterns and ritual practices that informed decisions on planting, harvesting and storage. Labour was organised along gender and age lines, with women playing a central role in crop cultivation, processing and preservation, while men were responsible for land preparation, livestock management and security. Indigenous land tenure arrangements, maintained through inheritance rules, boundary markers and elder mediation, provided stability and continuity in indigenous food production. Barter trade with neighbouring communities supplemented local resources and strengthened regional ties. The study demonstrates that indigenous food production in the pre-colonial period was a well-organised and adaptive system rooted in practical knowledge and social regulation. By highlighting these historical practices, the paper contributes to a clearer understanding of indigenous agrarian systems and their relevance to present discussions on food production and food security within changing social and policy contexts

Keywords: Pre-colonial, Indigenous food production, Land tenure, Labour organization and Seasonal calendar

Introduction

Prior to colonial invasion in Africa, indigenous food production operated through locally evolved knowledge, ecological adaptation and coherent social structures. Vansina (1979) observes that precolonial African societies had long relied on integrated systems of farming, fishing, hunting and gathering which structured daily life, seasonal calendars, and social relations. These indigenous systems were not static but historically dynamic, incorporating new crops and techniques through internal innovation and controlled external contact while maintaining local coherence. Green (2013) notes that African food production was shaped by indigenous responses to labour scarcity, fragile soils and disease environments, leading to sustainable practices such as shifting cultivation, crop diversity and land rotation. Garutsa and Nekhwevha (2018) further observe that indigenous knowledge guided food production, preservation and soil conservation practices, particularly through women's labour, ensuring household food security long before colonial interventions. Similarly, Muhandale et al. (2025) demonstrate that in precolonial Kenyan societies, indigenous food production operated within communal land tenure arrangements and gendered labour systems that ensured adequate food supply and social stability. Collectively, these studies show that indigenous food production constituted a coherent and resilient system that sustained African societies prior to colonial disruption.

Statement of the Problem

Livestock and crop production were central to the way of life, social organisation and survival of the Abagusii of Kenya during the pre-colonial period. Before colonial contact, the Abagusii depended on indigenous knowledge to guide both crop cultivation and livestock keeping. These practices shaped patterns of land use, the division of labour within households and production of food to meet domestic needs in supporting the community. Pre-colonial Abagusii farming involved the cultivation of food crops adapted to local environmental conditions, alongside the keeping of livestock for food, manure and social value. Knowledge relating to planting seasons, animal husbandry, grazing practices and disease management was transmitted from one generation to the next. Harvesting and storage practices were carefully organised to ensure the availability of food during dry seasons and periods of scarcity. Livestock and crop products were also exchanged with neighbouring communities to supplement local food supplies. Despite the importance of

livestock and crop production in shaping pre-colonial Abagusii society, there is limited detailed historical scholarship that explains how these activities were organised and sustained. Much of the existing literature discusses on the colonial and post-colonial transformation of the Abagusii agricultural practices. There remains insufficient understanding on how indigenous knowledge on food production functioned among the Abagusii in the pre-colonial period. This gap in knowledge makes the present study timely.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Mode of Production Theory, which was propagated by Karl Marx in 1867. The theory explains how societies organise the use of land, labour and tools in order to produce, store and exchange goods. It is based on the idea that people's ways of life are shaped by how they produce food and meet their basic needs (Banaji, 2010). In the pre-colonial period, production systems were not driven by profit but by the need to sustain households and the community. Among the Abagusii, land was the main resource for food production and was accessed through family and clan arrangements. Farming activities which entail crop production and animal rearing relied on family and communal labour, with clear roles according to gender and age groups. Crop production was mainly meant to meet household needs and ensure food availability. Harvesting took place in specific seasons and often involved cooperation among family members and neighbours. Surplus produce was stored using indigenous methods to provide food during dry seasons and times of scarcity. The theory also helps to explain pre-colonial trade among the Abagusii, which developed from surplus production and was carried out through barter trade with neighbouring communities. By applying the Mode of Production Theory, this study examined how livestock and crop production which included harvesting, storage and trade among the Abagusii formed a well-organised and socially regulated food system in the pre-colonial period.

Methodology

This study adopted a historical research design to examine indigenous knowledge systems related to food production among the Abagusii of Kenya in the pre-colonial period. The design was appropriate for reconstructing indigenous practices in analysing how crop and livestock production were organised within the Abagusii community before colonial invasion. The study utilised both primary and secondary sources in obtaining historical data. Primary data were collected through oral interviews conducted in Gusiiland, covering Kisii and Nyamira administrative counties. The study area was selected because it is where the Abagusii have lived for the longest period following their migration and settlement and where they form the majority population, a situation that has contributed to the preservation of indigenous knowledge on food production. A total of 38 informants participated in the study, of whom 8 were key informants selected through purposive sampling based on their specialised knowledge of indigenous food production. These included farmers who currently engage or previously engaged in indigenous food production, agricultural officers and custodians of Gusii oral history, notably members of the Kisii Council of Elders and Mwanyagetinge Heritage Centre. Snowball sampling was used to identify the remaining general informants through chain referrals, comprising members of the Abagusii community with general knowledge of the phenomenon under study. The collected data was transcribed, translated where necessary and organised thematically in line with the objective of the study. Secondary data was sourced from books, journal articles, theses and dissertations on pre-colonial food production and indigenous knowledge. Data analysis and presentation was conducted through descriptive narrative, supported by direct quotations from oral testimonies. The study adhered to established ethical standards and received approval from Kisii University, while a research licence was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI).

Results and Discussions

Abagusii Migration, Settlement and Indigenous Food Production

Oral traditions indicate that Abagusii settled in present-day Gusii by the mid-nineteenth century. According to Akama et al. (2024), Abagusii oral traditions trace their origins to mythical Misri near Mt Elgon, while Ndenda (2019) records that Abagusii identifies Mogusii as its founder, whose ancestry is traced to Kintu, an early Bantu leader. Internal conflicts within this Bantu group are believed to have triggered migration in search of fertile land to sustain indigenous food production. While at Mt Elgon, Abagusii formed part of a wider Bantu-speaking group that included the Ganda, Soga, Agikuyu, Ameru, Suba and Kuria, whom they collectively referred to as *Abanto Baito*. During this period, they practised hunting and gathering, cultivated finger millet and sorghum and kept livestock, activities that supported population growth (Nyamwaka, 2011). Around c.1500, Abagusii migrated through Yimbo, where they settled for about two generations while continuing indigenous crop and livestock production and adopted fishing (Ochieng, 1974). Between 1640 and 1755, they occupied Kisumu, but extreme heat, overcrowding and frequent livestock raids disrupted food production, prompting further movement (Nyamwaka, 2011; Kiriama, 1986). By 1760-1800, the Abagusii had settled in the Kano Plains, where they developed organised clan structures and expanded indigenous food production through crop cultivation, livestock keeping, fishing, hunting and gathering (Ndenda, 2019). Their migration continued southward making a temporary settlement in Kabianga, where a wet, cold climate unlike that of the Kano Plains led to poor crop yields, heavy livestock losses and repeated Kipsigis raids for land and cattle. In response, the Abagusii built *orwaki*, trenched fortified settlements and *ebisarate*, cattle bomas and named the area Kabianga, meaning "refusal." Between 1789 and 1809, the Abagusii moved through Maasai territory, experiencing severe livestock losses due to conflict (Ochieng, 1974). Eventually, by around 1850, they settled in the Gusii Highlands, where favourable environmental conditions enabled them to establish permanent settlements and consolidate mixed indigenous food production systems that sustained both livelihood and identity. These findings demonstrate that migration and settlement among the Abagusii in the pre-colonial period were fundamentally informed by the need to sustain indigenous food production. Settlement decisions were closely determined by access to fertile land, reliable water sources and adequate pasture necessary for crop cultivation and livestock keeping, which ensured food security.

Social-Economic Organization

Ochieng (1974) argues that in the pre-colonial period, Abagusii society was organized within a decentralized, clan-based framework, in which the household formed the core social and economic unit. This household consisted of a man, his wife or wives, and their children, and operated with a considerable degree of autonomy. Supporting this view, Jemima observed that the household functioned as a self-regulating unit, with authority vested in the male household head and exercised in collaboration with his wives (Ongori, O.I., 21/10/2024). Within this social arrangement, polygamy was culturally sanctioned and widely practiced. Osiemo noted that men were encouraged to marry more than one wife as a means of ensuring household security and continuity, since the presence of multiple wives guaranteed the maintenance of domestic and caregiving responsibilities even in cases of illness or absence (Osiemo, O.I., 14/10/2024). This clearly indicates that monogamy was regarded as undesirable, while having two or more wives was considered the normative marital expectation. Achoki writes:

... marrying more wives solved a woman's barrenness among the Abagusii community; if a man, for instance realized that his wife was barren, he had to marry another wife or wives who would bare him children. Children were indeed assets to any Abagusii family (Achoki, 2020).

This implies that polygamy was closely connected to indigenous food production, as marrying additional wives increased household labor for cultivation and food processing. Children born within these households were valued as essential contributors to agricultural work, thereby enhancing food security and economic stability. Similarly, Ochoi describes a homestead system in which the household head occupied *egesa kia omogaka*, a central hut that functioned as a social and ceremonial space for receiving guests and offering *ebusa*, the traditional brew. The compound was securely enclosed, with all wives residing within a single boma, while each woman managed her own portion of land for subsistence farming. Close to the main residence was the *egesarate*, cattle enclosure whose role extended beyond livestock security to the social training of newly circumcised youths (Ochoi, O.I., 21/10/2024). Achoki (2020) explains that several households formed a clan led by *omogambi*, who worked with *abaturoti*, a council of elders to administer clan affairs. Similarly, Onindo contended that leadership structure combined judicial, religious and political responsibilities (Onindo, O.I., 21/10/2024). Akama (2017) further emphasizes that spiritual figures, including *abarai*, leaders such as Sakagwa *abaragori*, seers and *abanyibi*, rainmakers held considerable influence and worked alongside clan authorities. These leadership roles were central to regulating indigenous food production, particularly through land allocation, ritual oversight of seasonal cycles and the coordination of labor within the homestead and the clan.

Indigenous food production among the Abagusii sustained substantial cultivation of finger millet and sorghum, alongside the rearing of cattle, goats and sheep. Nyanaro noted that this surplus positioned Gusii as a source of food for neighbouring communities during periods of scarcity. However, despite this productivity, the Abagusii were not wholly self-reliant in the manufacture of iron tools and other blacksmith implements essential to agrarian life (Nyanaro, O.I., 13/10/2024). According to Mumbo, indigenous trade was integral to Abagusii livelihoods. She explained that her grandmother travelled to Oyugis with her peers to obtain items such as sweet potatoes and cooking pots through barter trade. Similarly, Luo traders visited Gusii homesteads carrying *ebara*, salt licks, carefully measuring exchanges against quantities of sorghum or finger millet. These traders often spent the night in host homesteads, relying on local hospitality and neighbours would gather to participate in the exchange when informed of their presence (Mumbo, O.I., 21/10/2024). Motanya noted that interactions with the Luo extended beyond indigenous crop exchange, as animals were traded for cereals such as finger millet and sorghum. He also indicates that the Luo contributed to Abagusii agriculture by supplying key tools, including the *ekoyo*, hoe for land preparation and cutting implements which include knives used during finger millet harvesting (Motanya, O.I., 1/11/2024). In support of this view, Ochieng (1974) explains that the Luo depended on the Abagusii for grain supplies during periods of drought and famine. In exchange, they offered blacksmithing expertise and traded livestock for food crops, as the environmental conditions in their region limited sustained food production.

The Kipsigis were frequently implicated in raiding activities within Gusiland. Mumbo observed that such raids were systematically organized, with local informants providing strategic guidance to Kipsigis warriors regarding targeted areas (Mumbo, O.I., 17/10/2024). Nyanaro confirmed that when a Kipsigis presence was detected, the warning spread rapidly across Gusii, prompting communities to remain alert overnight. In Nyamiranga she noted, alarming cries mobilized Gusii warriors, who moved toward Riamakura. The message was then relayed to Bogetutu and Bogere, Luoland, where allies prepared their *chinguba*, shields. By morning, *Abagere*, Luo returned home, while the Abagusii marked the raids by adorning themselves with black charcoal and white chalk while expressing mourning through songs (Nyanaro, O.I., 13/10/2024). However, as Nyamondo observed, relations between the Kipsigis and the Abagusii were not defined solely by conflict and hostility. Alongside tension, the two communities engaged in exchange, with the Kipsigis supplying military items such as *chinsara*, poisonous arrows and *amatimo* spears in return for finger millet and sorghum (Nyanaro, O.I., 12/10/2024). Omwoyo (2000) concurs, noting that the Kipsigis experienced repeated epidemics, droughts and famines in the late nineteenth century. During these crises, the Kipsigis sought food from the Gusii through barter involving livestock and items such as bows and arrows. In extreme cases, children were exchanged for *wimbi*, finger millet a practice reported less frequently among the Gusii.

Maranga (2024) argues that interactions between Abagusii and Maasai in the pre-colonial era were characterized by both hostility and collaboration. Frequent cattle raids conducted by the Maasai generated considerable friction, given the central role of livestock in Maasai social and economic organisation. Similar sentiments were echoed by Sarange who noted:

The Maasai often seized cattle from Abagusii herds and incorporated them into their own. In response, Abagusii elders and chiefs organized efforts to trace and recover the stolen livestock. When recovery attempts failed, armed confrontation followed, prompting women and children to relocate temporarily to areas such as Kenyeny for safety (Sarange, O.I., 30/10/2024).

The narration above illustrates that conflict between the Abagusii and the Maasai adversely affected indigenous food production by destabilizing women's and children's roles in cultivation and subsistence activities. Omanga explained that conflict resulting from raids reduced food availability among the neighbouring Maasai, forcing them to seek grain from the Abagusii. Exchange involved milk, hides and skins rather than livestock, which were seldom used in barter; a goat was only offered on rare occasions and typically to a close associate (Omanga, O.I., 30/10/2024). From the foregoing, Abagusii social and economic organisation, grounded in the household and clan system which sustained indigenous food production. It also facilitated participation in barter trade through which grain was exchanged for livestock, farm tools and other goods, thereby linking Abagusii economy with neighbouring communities.

Indigenous Land Tenure

Scholarly debate on pre-colonial African land tenure remains divided. Eurocentric interpretations have frequently portrayed landholding as informal and weakly structured, with Parsons and Palmer (1977) arguing that Southern and Central Africa lacked formal land tenure systems capable of supporting economic development. In contrast, Afrocentric scholars challenge this view, emphasising that African societies developed functional communal tenure systems administered by community authorities. Kandaire (1977) demonstrates that such arrangements ensured equitable access, social cohesion and sustainable land management such as in Southern Malawi.

In pre-colonial Gusiland, land was central to indigenous food production and economic organisation. Ochieng (1974) observes that population growth among the Abagusii necessitated permanent settlement and intensified cultivation. Nyandika further explained that increasing pressure on arable land led to forest clearance and the establishment of new homesteads (Nyandika, O.I., 13/10/2024). Osiemo recalled that land was abundant, enabling migration his grandfather to migrate from Chache Magwagwa, where land was allocated to peers who later settled permanently (Osiemo, O.I., 14/10/2024). This clearly indicates that mobility allowed households to relocate when land became exhausted, sustaining food productivity. Similar observations by Onyambu (2019) agree with this view noting that population expansion, coupled with ecological challenges such as drought and famine *egiateko*, encouraged settlement in peripheral areas bordering the Kipsigis and Maasai.

Once land was occupied, the household head coordinated the construction of permanent grass-thatched dwellings, supported by the labour of wives and children. Boundaries were clearly demarcated using indigenous markers such as *emerachuoki*, *ebinagwa*, prickly shrubs and trees including *omoroka*, *omotagara*, and *omotobo* (Sarange, O.I., 30/10/2024). Omwoyo (1990) and Onyambu (2019) observe that these markers played a key role in defining ownership and minimising conflict, while Osiemo noted that *omotobo* also served protective purposes. Beyond their practical function, boundary demarcations were socially recognised and ritually reinforced, reflecting their cultural significance (Osiemo, O.I., 14/10/2024). Land tenure followed patrilineal lines, with inheritance transmitted through male descendants and management vested in the household head. Nyandika highlighted the patriarch's role in allocating land for indigenous food production. Land use was differentiated into *enyomba*, residential land, *endemero*, arable fields, *embonga*, surplus production land for the household head and *amarisio*, communal grazing (Nyandika, O.I., 13/10/2024). Nyamondo explained that produce from *embonga yo' omogaka* was stored as a reserve against drought and famine, reflecting strategic food management (Nyamondo, O.I., 12/10/2024). This suggests that male land ownership played a central role in organizing indigenous food production and regulating land and food management practices.

Although infrequent, land disputes were resolved through established mechanisms. Nyambane notes that *etureti*, village elders traced lineage to determine rightful ownership, reinforced by ancestral oaths *chimuma*. Penalties for encroachment often involved forfeiture of livestock, underscoring the cultural value attached to land. Ritual practices accompanied boundary establishment, including symbolic acts linking the patriarch to the land. Upon death, the household head was buried on his land to affirm ownership and prevent disputes (Nyambane, O.I., 3/11/2024). Onindo confirmed that this practice symbolised permanent attachment to land. Succession was carefully managed, with widows holding land in trust for minor heirs and disputes resolved through *risangio ria matatii*, family assemblies (Onindo, O.I., 21/10/2024). Nyangate Kinaro noted that land was never alienated from the lineage, ensuring continuity of indigenous food production (Nyangate, O.I., 5/11/2024). It is clear from findings above that the Abagusii had a well-established land tenure system that supported indigenous food production and ensured food security.

Indigenous Labour Organisation

Indigenous labour was central to Abagusii indigenous food production, with the family constituting the primary unit of production. Nyanaro observed that labour availability was essential to successful cultivation, shaping marital decisions. Before marriage, young men considered the productive capacity of prospective wives and future children (Nyanaro, O.I., 13/10/2024). Tinega concurred with this view noting that men assessed the background of a prospective bride *ogosiganerwa* to ensure her household was not associated with chronic food shortages, a practice intended to secure productive partnerships (Tinega, O.I., 26/10/2024). Onyambu (2019) agrees noting that idleness was strongly discouraged and daughters from families labelled *abanyancharachara*, idle households were often marginalised. This finding clearly demonstrates that family formation among the Abagusii was closely tied to indigenous food production, with marriage serving as a strategy to secure reliable labour, ensure productive households in sustaining food security across generations.

Labour among the Abagusii was clearly organised along age and gender lines. As Omwoyo (1990) explains, tasks were allocated according to physical ability and socially defined roles in order to maximise efficiency. Men undertook labour-intensive activities such as clearing land for cultivation or settlement. Momanyi noted that the clearing of trees and shrubs to create *endemero*, arable land was a male responsibility, with the felled trees subsequently used in the construction of granaries (Momanyi, O.I., 22/10/2024). Onindo observed that young men, under the supervision of elders, guarded livestock in *ebisarate*, cattle bomas against raids, while boys were gradually introduced to herding and basic livestock management skills. Men also hunted, while boys practised hunting small animals using slingshots as a form of early training for adult responsibilities (Tinega, O.I., 21/10/2024).

Women played a central role in crop cultivation, harvesting, food processing, and preservation. They planted, weeded, harvested, and processed crops such as finger millet and sorghum, storing grain in granaries and *iroongo* (roof spaces) (Oreti, O.I., 6/10/2024). Mumbo similarly notes that women managed food processing activities, including grinding grain using *orogena* and *ensio*, and were responsible for maintaining food security through preservation techniques (Mumbo, O.I., 17/10/2024). Kinaro further observes that women fermented milk in *ebirandi* (gourds), smoked food, dried meat, and gathered vegetables such as *rinagu* (black nightshade) and *enderema* (Malabar spinach), which were later cultivated for household use (Kinaro, O.I., 13/10/2024). Girls assisted women in farming and domestic work, preparing them for future roles in food production, and in households without male heirs, they assumed responsibilities normally assigned to boys, including livestock herding (Tinega, O.I., 21/10/2024). Oreti explains that *ebisangio* was vital during harvesting and weeding (*okoaaga*), while Mumbo notes that harvesting finger millet could extend over several months and often required cooperation among extended families (Oreti, O.I., 6/10/2024). Matogo (2024) concurs, noting that labour contributions within cooperative groups such as *ebisangio* were measured using *esinde*, a practice that encouraged participation and discouraged idleness. Håkansson (1988) further notes that during periods of crisis, labour among the Abagusii was mobilised through *risaga*, a practice that involved collective work and the sharing of food and livestock, while blacksmiths, *abaturi* played a crucial role by producing agricultural tools. It is clear that the division of labour and communal cooperation

underpinned the efficiency and sustainability of Abagusii indigenous food systems.

Indigenous Abagusii Calendar and Indigenous Food Production, 1850-1904

In the pre-colonial period, the Abagusii employed a well-developed indigenous calendar that guided food production activities throughout the year. This calendar was grounded in close observation of natural phenomena, which informed agricultural timing and decision-making. Nyamondo notes that Abagusii relied on *amaagonga*, crane birds as ecological indicators; their passage signalled the onset of *omwaka*, the tilling season, known as *monuguno o'barema*, January (Nyamondo, O.I., 12/10/2024). The second month, *egetamo*, February, was marked by intense heat and characterised by land clearing, planting and sowing, activities accompanied by dust from continuous tillage.

The third month, *engatiato*, March focused on weeding, largely undertaken by women and children working in cooperative groups. Bonareri observes that this period was also associated with *ribina*, a rain-making ritual conducted by women from Kebirigo, Nyamira and Mabundu. These ceremonies were often held at Sironga, where women sought the intervention of Moka Misindi, *omonyibi*, rainmaker. Participants wore decorated garments, *chingobo* and performed ritual dances (Bonareri, O.I., 13/10/2024). Nyang'ate explains that the rainmaker identified spiritual causes of drought, such as the presence of *nchinkuru*, tortoises within households and prescribed corrective actions to restore rain. Nyamwaka (2011) supports this view, noting that ritual songs, dances and sacrifices were believed to prompt divine and ancestral intervention. When rain-making rituals failed, Abagusii consulted *omoragori*, seer who mediated between the community, *Engoro*, God and *ebirecha*, the spirit world. Their guidance often involved reconciliation, offerings or changes in conduct, after which rains were believed to follow. Hailstorms were mitigated through the use of *ekerundu*, a ritual grass practice performed by the last-born child in the household (Momanyi, O.I., 22/10/2024).

The fourth month, *rigwata*, April, brought heavy rainfall and an abundance of wild foods such as *amaboba*, mushrooms and *amandegere*. Oreti notes that this period marked rapid germination of finger millet, sorghum, beans and indigenous maize (Oreti, O.I., 6/10/2024). In *amaumuntia*, May) weeding intensified, with cooperative labour groups, *ebisangio* becoming common. Omwoyo (1990) observe that households avoiding such communal labour often experienced declining food production. The sixth and seventh months, *ebwagi*, June and *enkoromoni*, July were periods of food scarcity due to reduced rainfall. Kinaro describe *ogosuma*, the practice of seeking food such as bananas from relatives as a recognised coping strategy (Kinaro, O.I., 22/10/2024). During this period, reliance on livestock products which include milk and meat increased. Onindo explains *esagare*, cow lending through which households accessed milk remained dominant with ownership of the offsprings remaining with the lender (Onindo, O.I., 21/10/2024). However as explained by Osiemo, reliance on this practice was strongly discouraged, as expressed in the Ekegusii proverb "*Eyabande marogoba egoosia*," denoting that a borrowed cow seizes to give milk in the evening (Osiemo, O.I., 14/10/2024).

Food abundance dominated in *riete*, August as finger millet matured. Nyamondo notes that harvests were plentiful, prompting granary reinforcement and storage of *ogotongora*, first produce. Harvesting extended into September, *Tureti ya 'Kebaki*, with declining rainfall prompting further rain-making rituals (Nyamondo, O.I., 12/10/2024). October, *engatiato* involved minimal activity, while November (*egesunte gia Chache*) marked early harvests in the lowlands and preparations for circumcision ceremonies. December (*egesunte kia Masaba*) concluded the calendar with harvests in the uplands and thanksgiving rituals to *Engoro* (Nyangate, O.I., 5/11/2024). The findings above indicate that Abagusii indigenous food production was systematically aligned with seasonal variation through ecological observation, ritual practice, and adaptive strategies. Ecological indicators such as bird migration and rainfall patterns informed agricultural cycles, while spiritual mediation guided decision-making. Practices such as *esagare* and *ogosuma* mitigated periods of scarcity, demonstrating a coherent and resilient indigenous food production system.

Indigenous Crop Production, Animal Products and Wild Food Acquisition

Food production among the Abagusii was grounded in a diverse and carefully coordinated system of crop cultivation, harvesting, preservation animal husbandry and wild food acquisition. This system ensured household subsistence while responding effectively to environmental variability. Abagusii agriculture relied on the cultivation of staple crops such as *obori*, finger millet, *amaemba* sorghum, indigenous maize *ekemuguri*, indigenous beans *amanyabwari*, sweet potatoes and bananas (*amatoke*). These staples were complemented by a wide range of indigenous vegetables, including *rinagu*, black nightshade, *chinsaga* Capparidaceae, *enderema* Malabar spinach, *omotere* Myrsinaceae, *rikongiro*, pigweed and *risosa*, pumpkin leaves. Seasonal foods such as *amabooba* mushrooms, *osure*, large black mushrooms, *ayaabogere*, yellow mushrooms and *amandegere* further diversified the diet and enhanced nutritional balance (Sarange).

Oral accounts consistently identify finger millet as the primary staple in pre-colonial Abagusii society. Its resilience to varied climatic conditions made it the most reliable crop for food security. Seed selection prioritised grains of appropriate size, colour, and texture. Selected grain was stored in *omonyoncho*, a tightly sealed woven container safeguarded with *egetono* mixed with cow dung to deter pests and rodents. The cultivator seed, *embusuro* was carefully dried and stored in *irongo*, roof spaces to maintain optimal moisture levels before planting (Nyanaro, O.I., 13/10/2024). Finger millet was notably resistant to pests, further reinforcing its reliability. Women played a central role in the finger millet production cycle. They prepared seeds for *okobusura* sowing and undertook regular *okooaga*, weeding to remove *enchagwa*, weeds a task reserved for *abang'ina be'enchagwa*, women recognised for their expertise (Mumbo, O.I., 17/10/2024). Upon maturity, harvesting was conducted through *ebisangio*, a cooperative group involving women and children from the same lineage. This communal labour reinforced social cohesion while ensuring timely harvests. Stalks were transported to granaries for ripening, dried on *orwambo*, drying racks or *riiyo*, cowhide mats and threshed using *ekiige*. Grain was winnowed with *oroeru* winnowing baskets and stored again in *omonyoncho* (Ombongi, O.I., 23/10/2024). Grinding was done using *orogena* and *ensio* stones to produce flour for *ugali*, prepared in *enyakaruga* cooking pots. Nyanaro noted that sorghum, *amaemba* was cultivated and processed similarly and often blended with millet to enhance flavour and nutritional value (Nyanaro, O.I., 13/10/2024).

Indigenous maize varieties such as *nyang'echi ekieni nyasero nyamware*, dull purple maize were also significant. Seeds were selected from the first harvest and preserved by suspending cobs above the *eriko*, fireplace, where smoke acted as a natural preservative (Nyangate, O.I., 5/10/2024). Kinaro noted that maize stored on the cob could remain viable for more than a year. When planting time arrived, *embusuro*, cultivator was *ogosimeka*, sown. Mature maize kernels were removed using *ribiria* stones, sun-dried on *orwambo* or *riiyo*, and used both for food and brewing *ebusaa*, consumed during labour seasons (*risaga*) and ceremonies such as circumcision and marriage (Nyanaro, O.I., 13/10/2024). Long-term storage was achieved in *ekiage* granaries reinforced with *emegoye* ropes and thatched with *ekenyoru*, grass periodically cleaned with aromatic plants such as *omotio*, Mexican marigold to repel pests (Motuka, O.I., 29/10/2024).

Sweet potatoes served as an important supplementary crop, especially during drought and famine. Cultivation involved careful soil preparation, mound formation, planting and regular weeding carried out by women (Bochere, O.I., 6/10/2024). Harvesting was done after approximately three months, with farmers assessing maturity manually. Because sweet potatoes were highly perishable, they were consumed promptly or redistributed to kin experiencing shortages, *ogosuma*. This finding suggests established practices of social redistribution aimed at ensuring that no household lacked food. Bananas were cultivated using *embande*, pseudo-stems planted in pits prepared by men. According to Motuka, a single pseudo-stem could generate between six and ten offshoots within six to seven months, producing fruit after about one year. Green bananas were boiled for food, while others were allowed to ripen through *ogosusana*, withering (Motuka, O.I., 29/10/2024). Despite their dietary importance, bananas were unreliable during prolonged droughts and famines.

Vegetables grew naturally others were adapted by women while gathering. After they had been collected, they were preserved through boiling and sun-drying, *egesuka*, stored in clay pots in roof spaces for use during dry seasons, *egurugura* (Bochere, O.I., 6/10/2024). Pumpkin leaves, *risosa* were valued for medicinal purposes, while *enderema* was commonly prepared with *ebaraa*, salt and millet *ugali*. Mushrooms were harvested seasonally, sun-dried and stored in roof spaces where smoke from the hearth provided antimicrobial protection, extending shelf life beyond a year (Motuka, O.I., 29/10/2024).

Animal products formed another vital component of Abagusii food systems. Indigenous fats *amaguta* were obtained from milk and sheep tails. Milk fat was produced through *ogutunda amabere*, a labour-intensive shaking process performed by women. Sheep-tail fat was extracted through *ogosaarora*, allowing long-term storage. Beyond cooking, *amaguta* served medicinal purposes when mixed with *obosaro*, herbs to treat childhood ailments such as *amatondogosi* (Nyambane, O.I., 3/11/2024). Cattle occupied a central place in Abagusii life, providing milk, blood, wealth, and social status. Milk was fermented in smoked *ekerandi*, gourds to prevent spoilage. Blood was collected using *okorasa* arrows, consumed fresh or mixed with milk, and preserved by frying with *amaguta* or sun-drying. These practices ensured protein availability during food shortages and reinforced communal bonds (Motuka, O.I., 29/10/2024).

Wild food acquisition further supplemented subsistence. Hunting, *ogotwara* was undertaken by mature men and targeted animals such as hares, antelope, spiny ant-eaters and antbears (Motuka, O.I., 29/10/2024). Hunting was organized through employing fire, dogs, arrows and group of young men coordinating the hunt. Meat was preserved through draining blood, sun-drying on *omotanda* and salting with *ebaraa*, acquired from the neighbouring Luo. Gathering of wild fruits and vegetables also played a key role, with viable species domesticated into kitchen gardens, expanding food security (Omwando, O.I., 22/10/2024). The findings indicate that Abagusii food production, harvesting and storage were organised through diversified crop cultivation, cooperative labour and effective preservation practices of crop and animal produce in mitigating food shortage.

Conclusion

From the findings presented in this study, it is clearly demonstrated that indigenous food production among the Abagusii in the pre-colonial period was systematically organised and guided by practical knowledge developed and passed over generations. Food production was structured around the household and clan, which determined access to land, allocation of labour and management of food resources. Definition of roles based on gender and age ensured that cultivation, livestock keeping, harvesting and food preservation were carried out effectively. Agricultural activities were guided by close observation of the natural environment and reinforced through ritual practices. Seasonal patterns, rainfall behaviour and ecological indicators informed decisions on planting and harvesting. Spiritual mediation and communal rituals strengthened discipline, cooperation and responsibility, especially during periods of drought and food shortage. Indigenous land tenure practices, marked by clear boundaries, inheritance rules and elder mediation, provided secure access to land and reduced disputes, allowing food production to continue without disruption. Knowledge of seed selection, storage and preservation played an important role in ensuring food availability throughout the year. Crops were dried, smoked and stored in granaries and roof spaces using locally available materials. Livestock products and wild foods supplemented cultivated crops, while exchange with neighbouring communities provided additional resources such as tools and livestock. These practices reduced the effects of seasonal shortages and supported community survival.

Recommendation

It is recommended that indigenous food production knowledge be treated as a historically situated system of practice that may inform, but not replace, contemporary food production arrangements. Knowledge related to seasonal awareness, indigenous seed selection and indigenous food storage methods retains relevance and may be applied at the household level where ecological and economic conditions permit. However, transformations in land use, labour organisation and settlement patterns, together with the growing influence of government agricultural policies on land tenure, crop choice, extension services and market-oriented production, have reshaped the conditions under which food production takes place. Within this context, indigenous practices should be engaged selectively and in ways that are compatible with existing policy frameworks and household-based farming systems, through informed collaboration between agricultural extension services, local administrations and recognised custodians of indigenous knowledge. This approach will enable indigenous food production knowledge to make a meaningful contribution to current agrarian practice in ensuring food security.

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