pp 27-39 W.W. I

THE ECONOMY OF PRE-COLONIAL BUGISU

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Bugisu is the home of the Bantu-speaking Bagisu of eastern Uganda who prefer to be known as Bamasaba. In 1959 they numbered about 329,251. Many of them live on the foothills and slopes of Mount Elgon (which is locally known as Masaba) while others occupy the southern and south-western plains. In the north and north-east they are bounded by the Sebei; by the Iteso in the north-west and south; on the west by the Bagwere and Basoga; and on the south-west, east and south-east by the Banyole and Abaluyia, respectively. Mount Elgon is also the home of the Kalenjin-speaking Kony and Sebei.

An extinct volcano, Mount Elgon, which is about 14,584 feet high, is the most conspicuous single feature in the entire country. It is famous for its alpine vegetation, snow (which falls on its highest peak) and the numerous caves in which the local inhabitants formerly lived. It is also the source of several rivers which traverse Bugisu such as Malaba, Manafwa, Siroko and Namatala. On the whole Bugisu is well watered, enjoys a good rainfall and has some of the best land in Uganda. All this has substantially influenced the mode of livelihood:

> The topography of the country has largely determined the occupation and mode of life of its inhabitants. Thus the slopes and foothills of the mountain and the numerous hills and ridges are littered with settlements. These are invariably surrounded by thick banana groves which also abound in the valleys. Millet and eleusine are grown as is also coffee, a leading cash crop. Eleusine and millet are the staple food in Central and South Bugisu.... In these two areas bananas are not as important as in the north.... Here again cattle, goats and sheep are kept.[1]

It is still uncertain as to when Bugisu was first settled by modern man. However, it is apparent that by about 1000 A.D. the country between the Kavirondo Gulf and Mount Elgon (including Bugisu) was already settled by Bantu-speaking people and a group of people whose language was akin to Kalenjin. The latter, who are now called the Kitoki Southern Nilotes, were eventually assimilated by their Bantu-speaking neighbours, the ancestors of many of the present sections of the Abaluyia and the Bagisu.[2] Since the southern Nilotes who intermingled with the Bantu-speaking progenitors of some of the Bagisu and Abaluyia are believed to have earlier come into prolonged contact with Southern Cushites from Ethiopia in Kenya's western highlands, it is adjoining to conclude that by the end of the first millennium

A.D. Bugisu and adjoining parts of western Kenya were occupied by a mixture of the Bantu, Southern Cushites and Southern Nilotes.

According to oral tradition it would appear that by the close of the 15th century Bugisu was partly settled by the bulk of its modern inhabitants. Certainly by early 16th century immigrants of Kalenjin (Sebei and Nandi), Maasai, Ethiopian and Bantu origins were living in parts of the country. Mount Elgon in the north was the original area of settlement by the first three categories of immigrants who also seem to have constituted the core of the modern Bagisu. In all probability the newcomers intermingled with their predecessors who, as we have seen, occupied the country sometime in the first millennium A.D. The result was a heterogeneous Bantu-speaking community whose culture was substantially influenced by those of the component ethnic groups. "It goes without saying that their language is a product of the various cultural groups which mingled together.... As a result of centuries of mixing, intermarriage and cultural interaction, the Bagisu finally emerged as a distinct cultural and linguistic entity."[3]

It is against this geographical and historical background that we must now proceed to consider the issue of economic development up to the late 19th century. In view of the preceding observations on origins and settlement, it is reasonable to assume that many of the developments under discussion date back at least to the late 15th century. It is needless to add that events in earlier centuries must have influenced such developments. The four centuries following the occupation of Bugisu by its modern inhabitants witnessed significant economic and social changes. By the late 19th century, Bugisu had emerged from the original simple stage of reliance on hunting and gathering (supplemented with pastoralism) as a means of livelihood to mixed agriculture as the economic mainstay. By this time too, the country had outgrown the old restricted, if rather unrewarding, trading activities which were circumscribed by local village needs and established an elaborate and highly lucrative network of domestic and external trade with significant consequences. Such a tremendous economic transformation could only have been made possible by a combination of favourable factors. The task of this paper is to analyse the nature and scope of this economic transformation; the chief determinants of economic growth; and the impact of all this on the country.

Broadly speaking, four principal stages are discernible in the economic growth and transformation of Bugisu. The first stage is one where hunting and gathering formed the basis of livelihood. It was supplemented with pastoral products. At that time sheep and goats were still few and not widely distributed. During the second stage hunting and gathering as a means of livelihood was vigorously challenged by agriculture as agricultural tools and techniques gradually became more refined and efficient. However, agriculture and pastoralism were still subordinate to hunting and gathering as a source

of livelihood. The third phase, which merges into the fourth, witnessed fantastic growth in external trade. The most important single result of that trade was the introduction of the iron hoe coupled by the acquisition of new food crops. Consequently, agriculture was greatly stimulated and the economy was so revolutionised that by the middle of the 19th century agriculture, rather than hunting and gathering, was the economic pillar. Agricultural growth was in turn stimulated by trade.

Traditional evidence suggests that by about the beginning of the 16th century the inhabitants of Bugisu (who at that time lived on Mount Elgon and its associated range of hills) lived by hunting and gathering. The country was full of game such as elephants, antelopes, rats, bucks, buffaloes, hyenas, foxes, lions, leopards and monkeys. Of these the first five were killed for food while the rest were destroyed as a menace and a nuisance. Hunting was the most important occupation during the sojourn on the mountain and game was either trapped or killed with spears and arrows. While dangerous animals such as lions and leopards were often killed with poisoned arrows, those intended for food were generally killed with ordinary weapons but smaller animals like squirrels, rabbits and rats were either trapped or hunted with sticks. In addition to providing food, wild animals were useful as a source of dress and beddings for which their hides and skins were highly valued.

Throughout this early period the Bagisu partly depended on forest products for their livelihood. Since the country was thickly forested such foodstuffs were in plenty although they were supplementary to the meat of wild animals. During their stay on Mount Elgon the early Bagisu fed on young bamboo shoots called *Kamaleha* or *Kamaleya* which were in plenty and which are still cherished to this day as a special dish. Without doubt this was the most important single forest product used as food. Others were wild fruits such as pumpkins and bananas and wild roots of which yams and sweet potatoes were important. Finally, whilst still on Mount Elgon and, later, the adjoining plains, honey was an essential part of the Bagisu's diet. It is suggested that the forest was littered with beehives.

Available information suggests that pastoralism must have been practised by the ancestors of the Bagisu long before the 16th century. Though accounts differ about the origins of cattle-keeping, there is no doubt that cattle were imported into Bugisu from at least four sources.[4] First the early immigrants of Kalenjin origin are said to have brought some cattle with them from Kenya's Rift Valley Province. Ethiopia is another possible source of cattle for, according to tradition, the core of the Bagisu consists of people of Ethiopian origin. The Ethiopian immigrants are said to have brought some cattle with them. It would further appear that the early Bagisu acquired some cattle from the Maasai and Sebei around Mount Elgon. Later during the 18th and 19th centuries more cattle were raided from the neighbouring Iteso and increased in number. The conclusion to be drawn from all this

is that the early Bagisu kept some cattle and fed on milk, blood and beef as oral tradition asserts. However, it is quite possible that some of the earlier elements in the population were not pastoralists. Such people will have acquired their cattle and goats from their pastoral neighbours whom they preceded in the country. For example, some traditional evidence suggests that the first cattle were domesticated in Bugisu when some stray calves were found grazing among certain wild animals. Whatever the case, it is apparent that cattle products formed only a small part of the diet of the people as a whole.

It is paradoxical but none-the-less true that agriculture, which was later to become the backbone of the economy, was not at first practised during the settlement on Mount Elgon. In fact, for a long time during their sojourn on the mountain the Bagisu do not seem to have known anything about cultivation although many of the present crops were known. This contradicts Gayer's suggestion that the early Bagisu practised agriculture and that agricultural products formed their main diet which was *supplemented* with honey as the meat of wild animals.[5] It is even in sharper conflict with George Wamimbi-Masaaba's comment on the economic life of the Bagisu: "Right from the beginning of the existence of the Bamasaaba tribe, the main work among the Bamasaaba was agriculture."[6]

Accounts about the origins of agriculture are in broad agreement that the planting culture was developed while on Mount Elgon through the process of trial and error. But before we can develop this theme it is worth noting that there also exist myths about the origins of certain foodstuffs. According to one of these legends Masaba (the eponymous founder of the Bamasaaba or Bagisu) was given a banana sucker and eleusine grains by God; these provided Masaba and his descendants with food. Another one claims that Masaba brought with him some eleusine grains from Ethiopia. Finally, there is a myth which claims that the first man in Bugisu, called Mundu (or Shindu or Kintu), lived on the milk and dung of his cow until Walumbe and his daughter, Nambi, came from heaven and later actuated his ascent thither. After marrying Mundu, Nambi was asked by her father to name the food she would like to eat with her husband when they returned to the earth. This list included bananas, eleusine, potatoes and cow peas all of which grew in a wild state in the forest.

The conclusion to be drawn from these legends is that originally Mount Elgon was inhabited by hunter-gatherers who kept some cattle as well. Later there was an immigration of pastoralists who had also some knowledge of agriculture. For a long time, however, the impact of agriculture on the economy as a whole was insignificant. Cumbersome and laborious by nature, agriculture was unnecessary since plenty of food could be had either for the taking or with a minimum of exertion. Indeed, very few people, if any, must have practised it to any meaningful degree. McMaster has suggested that immigrants from

the north in Ethiopia may have been responsible for the introduction of "The planting culture, including the banana" via West Africa, the Cameroons and "the easy Congo-Nile divide." He adds: "Such a movement could have brought the Bantu-speaking agriculturalists to Uganda within the last 1,500 years and with them the main planted crops. If the banana was among them, considerable variation would already have been present upon which later selection has drawn."[7] However, as will be demonstrated below, though many of the food crops were imported, diffusion does not seem to account, to any significant degree, for the origins and spread of the planting culture in Bugisu.

Agriculture would appear to have increased in scale and importance as population gradually expanded into the lower foothills of the mountains and, ultimately, into the central and southern plains. As long as people lived in the forests on the mountain there was plenty of food which could be had with a minimum of labour. Moreover, such food was attractive and delicious. There was therefore no incentive for cultivation, a most laborious means of getting food. In addition, while one had to wait for at least two or three months before the crops could yield some food, wild animals, forest and cattle products were a ready source of food.

By about the beginning of the 17th century, however, the situation was slowly changing as population gradually expanded southwards and, therefore, away from the thick forests, the rich source of food. This development was partly precipitated by population growth; an increase in the livestock coupled with the exhaustion of old pastures and, consequently, the need for fresh ones; the harsh mountain climate characterised by excessive rain and cold; volcanic activity and its threat to human life; and the attractions of the less thickly forested plains with a warm climate and moderate rain.

The movement into the lower foothills of the mountain accelerated the growth of the planting culture based on eleusine, sorghum, bananas, cow peas, sweet potatoes and beans. Originally these crops are said to have grown in a wild state in the mountain forests. It was not until later that they were adopted as food. It is claimed that when birds were seen eating ripe bananas, people tasted them and, finding that they were harmless, adopted them as food. Elephants are also widely claimed to have facilitated the dispersal of bananas by carrying banana suckers on their trunks and depositing them in different parts of the forest. Elephants and birds are further associated with the spread and use of eleusine as food. According to traditional evidence some elephants fed on eleusine plants and later deposited their dung elsewhere. The eleusine grains, which were in the dung, germinated and grew. When people saw birds feeding on the grains without any ill effects they also tried to eat them. Eleusine proved to be harmless and was accordingly adopted as human food.

Many other types of food were also adopted as a result of the process

of experimentation. Often a mother would at first taste strange leaves, roots, fruits or grains to see if they were harmless in which case the rest of the family would be allowed to eat them. If they turned out to be injurious, they were not eaten. It was in this way, for example, that sweet potatoes were adopted as food. A woman who had gone into the forest to look for vegetables is said to have dug up a protruding potato tuber and when she saw that it looked good, tasted it. When it proved harmless, she took it home and cooked it for the family.

The planting culture would appear to have been slow in taking root partly because of the availability of food in the forests and partly due to lack of efficient tools for cultivation. Gradually, however, the exhaustion of the traditional forest products and of the new foodstuffs (which grew in a wild state) necessitated and encouraged the cultivation of food crops on a relatively large scale. Nevertheless, transition from hunter-gathering to agriculture was long and slow owing to lack of efficient tools. Up till about the late 18th century the only tools used for cultivation consisted of wooden implements and the hip bones of animals. The hip bones used for cultivation were called *kamayitsu* or *gamaitsu* and were taken from the forelegs of animals such as cows, goats, sheep and wild animals. Sometimes rib bones were also used for cultivation. The digging stick was used as were also larger wooden implements which were shaped like *Kamayitsu* and which resembled the cooking stick. Instead of digging a whole plot as is the case today, holes were dug into the soil and seeds droped into them and covered with soil. Later on the plants were weeded while the spaces between the plants remained bushy.

This method of agriculture was only possible as long as it was applied to the relatively soft and fertile soils of the forests and their periphery. It proved more difficult and less effective in the drier and less fertile soils of the plains thereby hindering agricultural advance. Clearly, if agriculture was to develop and become the mainstay of the economy the existing methods of cultivation had to change. To provide ample food for the growing population new and more efficient agricultural tools and techniques as well as additional food crops and a more systematic approach to cultivation were required. These prerequisites for the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture as the economic pillar were fulfilled about the beginning of the 19th century, thanks to the establishment of trade links with the outside world. As a result of the iron hoe trade and the acquisition of new food crops agriculture was revolutionised and the general economy substantially transformed.

To appreciate the significance of the economic changes of the period, it is necessary to examine the nature and extent of trade (especially with the outside world) since this was the most important single stimulant to economic and social development. Though organised markets did not exist until the late 19th century, trade by barter was an ancient occupation in Bugisu. Before

establishment of contacts with the outside world local trade involved, among other things, the exchange of foodstuffs; implements such as knives and digging tools; spears and arrows; ornaments such as bangles, rings and bracelets; pots; and rats, chickens and livestock for bridewealth. Though the rate of exchange varied from time to time and from place to place, it was generally known that so much millet or eleusine would fetch so many rats which in turn would be exchanged for so many hens, goats and cows, according to the case. In the majority of cases a poor person started his struggle for economic and social improvement by trapping rats which he dried and exchanged for other goods as follows:

10-30	hens	=	1 hen.
3-20	goats	=	1 goat.
10-20	goats	=	1 cow.
7	cows	=	1 bridewealth for a wife.
20-30	dried rats	=	1 bridewealth for a wife.

Most people simply allowed their hens, goats and cows to increase through the natural process in order to accumulate sufficient numbers for such transactions.

For all that, it was the establishment of trade relations with the outside world which stimulated economic change and growth in Bugisu. The precise date when such links were first established is still uncertain. However, by the early 19th century Bugisu was the focus of many important trading activities which flourished till the end of that century. Imports into the country consisted of iron hoes; foodstuffs and food crops; bark cloth and skins for clothing; goats, sheep and cattle; and ornaments. These were exchanged for the local foodstuffs (eleusine, sorghum, beans, cow peas and bananas); ivory; hens, goats, sheep and cattle; hides and skins; and girls and children in famine time. The imports came from different sources. For example, in famine time the Banyore of eastern Uganda brought cows, goats and sheep which they exchanged for bananas and sorghum. Occasionally they also brought children. The Banyole and the Jopadhola of the same area also brought some eleusine and cow peas whereas the Abaluyia of Bukhayo in western Kenya brought some cow peas which was exchanged for livestock And from neighbouring Bugwere to the south-west came a sweet brand of sweet potatoes as well as groundnuts while Busoga was the source of the red sweet potatoes. During this period, therefore, new food crops were acquired, more food was obtained and the livestock population increased through external trade.

A brief examination of the iron hoe trade shows that iron hoes were the most important single commercial commodity. In fact, by the mid 19th century iron hoes had become the local currency and people thought and spoke in terms of iron hoes. In a real sense, therefore, the 19th century may be described as the age of the iron hoe mania. Iron hoes are said to have

been immediately preceded in a few parts of the country by *gamamomo* hoes which were made from smelted stones from Bumbo in South Bugisu and resembled *Kamaitsu*. However, they do not appear to have made any significant impact on the economy.

The 19th century economy of Bugisu was founded on the iron hoe trade. The hoes were imported and exchanged for local goods. By far the most important sources of hoes were Bukoli in Busoga, Samia (astride the Kenya-Uganda border and near Lake Victoria), Wanga and Bukhayo in western Kenya. Some hoes were also acquired from Bukusu in western Kenya, Bugwere and Bunyoro while others were brought much later by the Baganda, Nyamwezi, Arabs and Swahili. Though in the majority of cases the hoes were brought by traders from the country of origin, in a few others Bagisu traders bought the hoes at source and brought them home where they in turn sold them to local dealers. The hoes would appear to have been generally of two types, *gamasesere* or *kamasesere*, which were heavy and shaped like a spear and the *namwesi* or *namwitsi*, which "had something like ears and resembled the new moon when held by the edges", hence their name. The former were originally introduced by the Bagwere and were most probably few than the *namwesi* which were associated with traders from Busoga, Wanga, Samia, Bukhayo and later, the Nyamwezi, Arabs and Swahili. When the *namwesi* and, later, modern hoes were introduced, the *gamasesere* from Bugwere were already in general use and so the Bagisu applied the Bagwere word, *imbako*, for the hoe to them as well. This is the name by which the hoe is still known in Bugisu.

And now a word about the nature of trade and, in particular, the exchange rates which varied from place to place and often even within the same locality, depending on the kind and quality of the commodities being exchanged. After the hoes had been brought into Bugisu they were sold as follows:

1 big hoe	=	2 rings or bangles.
1 small hoe	=	1 ring or bangle.
1 hoe	=	1 pot.
1 hoe	=	2-5 hens.
2 hoes	=	1 goatskin.
3 hoes	=	1 small cowhide.
5 hoes	=	1 big sowhide.
10 hoes	=	1 small tusk.
20 hoes	=	1 big tusk.
1-10 hoes	=	1 goat.
15 hoes	=	1 big she-goat.
10-30 hoes	=	1 cow.
40 hoes	=	1 big cow.
10-20 hoes	=	1 bridewealth for a wife.

When Arab, Swahili and, later, Indian traders introduced the modern hoe it was initially sold for fifty cents and later still for one-two shillings.

The network of the 19th century trade was rather complex and involved more people than the actual buyers and traders, the Bagisu and the foreign traders. Some Bakoli from Busoga, for example, went to Mount Elgon where they got some ivory from the Sebei and certain Bagisu which they took to the country of the Acholi in northern Uganda. In Acholiland the ivory was exchanged for hoes which were consequently brought into Bugisu by Bakoli traders and exchanged as already indicated. Apart from hoes, Arab, Swahili and Wanga traders brought beeds called *kamatongo* or *matongo* and cloth from the distant coast and sold them locally. The Arabs and Swahili exchanged their goods for ivory (which in turn had been obtained from the Sebei), bangles, banana fibres, hides and even some children. Additionally, some local traders were friends with the people of Busoga who gave them hoes which they exchanged for goats at home and returned to Busoga with the goats to buy more hoes for the home market. Finally, after the traders from Bukhayo in western Kenya had exchanged their hoes for local commodities, which included bangles, rings and bracelets, some of these goods were smelted back home, manufactured into hoes and resold to the Bagisu.

All these developments had a permanent impact on the Bagisu society by ushering in a new civilization in which agriculture was the cornerstone of the economy. The acquisition of iron hoes in large numbers accelerated the transition from hunter-gathering to agriculture as the principal source of livelihood. The iron hoe was a more efficient agricultural tool than any that had preceded it. Agricultural techniques were transformed and more land than ever before was brought under good and proper cultivation. This was coupled by the clearing of the forests (by means of better and more efficient iron weapons such as big knives, hoes and axes) and the planting of the new food crops acquired through trade. By the late 19th century practically everybody owned and used iron hoes and, therefore, had larger plots under cultivation and a bigger harvest than ever before. Conversely, as agriculture gradually became more efficient and the forests receded, forest products and game became increasingly scarce until in the end they became supplementary to agriculture and pastoralism as a source of livelihood. The coming and widespread application of the iron hoe had permanently revolutionised the economy.

This economic revolution hail important effects on society. Though the country enjoyed a higher degree of prosperity than ever before. there soon developed a serious cleavage in society. The iron hoe culture with its attendant trade bestowed unprecedented wealth into the hands of those who were enterprising, thrifty, patient and lucky thereby creating a new class of the rich and comfortable. Such men owned lots of hoes, goats, cows and foodstuffs and had many wives and large families. They wore goatskins and slept on

cowhides. They had a rich variety of food and enjoyed considerable respect in society. Their wives and daughters were fabulously adorned with bangles, rings and beads and other ornaments. In contrast, the vast majority of people were relatively poor and could not afford the luxuries enjoyed by their better placed coutrymen. They had small houses, and most of them could not afford to own cowhides, for cover at night, and goatskins for clothing. In fact, for the most part they slept on banana leaves. The argument is that though poverty and scarcity were as old as society itself, the replacement of the old hunter-gathering economy by agriculture and trade widened the gap between the rich and poor for there were now no more things to be had virtually for the taking as in the past.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

* Paper read at the Third International Congress of Africanists, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, December 1973.
This paper is based on my fieldwork findings which have not yet been published. They range from straight history — origins, settlement and evolution of the Bagisu — to religion, economics, political and social and organization as well as warfare.

1. G.S. Were, "Further Thoughts on the Early History of the Bagisu," *Journal of Eastern African Research and Development*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1971, Nairobi, pp. 99-100.
2. For further information see C. Ehret, *Southern Nilotic History*, Northwestern University Press, Illinois, 1971, pp. 50-63.
3. G.S. Were, *op. cit.*, p. 103. See also my article entitled "A Historical Background of Circumcision among the Bamasaba", *Imbalu: Circumcision Rites among the Bamasaba*, Acta Musicologia et Linguistica, Vienna. (In Press.)
4. There are also several myths about the origins of cattle. According to one of them the first man in Bugisu was given a cow by God and he fed on its milk and dung. It was the source of all cattle.
5. C.M.A. Gayer, *Land Tenure in Uganda*, Uganda Government Printer, Entebbe, 1957.
6. G.W. Wamimbi-Masaba, "A History of the Bagisu", Unpublished Ms.
7. D.N. McMaster, "Speculations on the coming of the banana to Uganda", *Uganda Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1963, pp. 172-173.
See also B.W. Langlands, "The Banana in Uganda — 1860-1920," *Uganda Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1966.
8. The number of rats, hens, goats or cows was determined by the size of the other commodity. So that a big goat would cost more hens and a big cow more goats.