

The Place of Livestock in the Social, Political and Economic Organization of the Akamba of Machakos during the Pre-Colonial Period

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Abstract: This paper sought to examine the centrality of livestock among the Akamba of Machakos during the pre-colonial period. Specifically, it analysed the place of livestock in the social, political and economic organization of the Akamba in the pre-colonial era. Data for this study was collected using both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included archival materials and oral interviews. The target population were the people who had knowledge on the Akambapre-colonial livestock industry. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 24 informants. Secondary sources were also utilized to complement the primary sources. They included books, journal articles, dissertations and unpublished documents. Data was analyzed using qualitative method. The study established that livestock economy was a key pillar in the social, economic and political organization of the Akamba during the pre-colonial period.

Keywords: Akamba, Livestock Economy, Economic, Political, Social

1. INTRODUCTION

Livestock economy played a significant function in the evolution of the Akamba institutions. It provided social, political and economic necessities largely influencing the evolution of the social economic and political institutions which were established among the Akamba community. This is made clear in the sections below.

2. SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The significance of livestock in the Kamba social system was well expressed in social structures and institutions. The Akamba livestock attachment intervened at one point or another in the ceremonies concerned with all their social structures and functions. For example, livestock was an important ingredient of the family, clan, marriage, child birth, initiations, among others.

Among the social structures where livestock played a crucial role was the *musyi*. *Musyi* was the basic unit in Akamba social organisation. The word *Musyi* literally means a „family“. It is also used to refer to a home. Therefore, the word *Musyi* is taken to stand for both residence and affinal-consanguinal relations¹. The father was the head of the family. He played the managerial function. Further, he had the physical and jural rights over the household's livestock. The father therefore, had the right to transfer physically an animal from his herd to somebody else. For instance, he could transfer part of his animals from his herd to that of his in laws in the form of bride wealth.²The members of the family had the jural rights of ownership of animals. According to this right, they physically owned the animals and enjoyed the use of their products like milk, blood and meat but had no right to transfer these animals to friends. They built their animals from a livestock allotted by their

¹ Lindblom, G. *The Akamba in British East Africa*.

² OI. Chief Mutua Nzuki at Makutano on 01/11/2020.

mother, father and the relatives. The labour offered by cattle associates to a household was usually rewarded in kind. These ranged from milk, meat and butter.

Next to the family was the *Mbai*, or the clan. The *Mbai* ranked second to *Musyi* in the kin structure and function of the Akamba people. A clan, according to the Akamba means a group of people whose members are related or in other way connected by means of a common bond. Underscoring the role of the clan among the Akamba, Katola says that, the clan is a *Mkamba*'s certificate by which he identifies himself when he meets another *Mkamba*.³ Apart from their believe in common descent from a real mythical ancestor, the common type of such a uniting bond is a totem which signify their unity and common bond that they share with one another.⁴

The functions of the *Mbai* merge on many points with those of *Musyi*, but they differ both quantitatively and qualitatively. The first distinction between the two is membership. *Mbai* comprises several families that can trace their descent to a remote common ancestor.⁵ Each clan branded their cattle so as to identify them from others when they mingled during communal grazing. They branded conventional patterns on the flanks of their cattle and they also sometimes marked their ears. Each clan had several brands, but a certain family had its own brand. Upon seeing branded cattle, a *Mkamba* would know at once which clan the brand belonged to.⁶

All the pre-colonial Akamba agreed on the basic importance of the clan, and all would give the same reason for its importance. As Oliver⁶ puts it, "the clan will help a man if he gets into a serious trouble. It clearly provides a kind of security in a very fluid system, and here the rules are spelled out with precision." For instance, if a young man was orphaned or his parents were too poor and did not have enough livestock to afford the bride-wealth, each member of the clan would be asked to chip in and contribute a certain number of animals towards the bride wealth. Similarly, a clan member may have a big debt due to an accident (*mbanga*). For example if accidental fire destroys other people's property or in case of accidental killing. Usually, the fine for accidental killing would be fourteen head of cattle for a man and eight for a woman. If the said person is unable to raise the number of animals that he is asked to pay then his clan members would unite and assist him to pay the debt.⁶¹ It can therefore be argued that clans used to undertake major social-economic problems cooperatively. They bore the immediate responsibility of disciplining their members as well as helping those in economic crisis.

Livestock was also highly involved in all the Akamba social functions especially during the rites of passage. In child birth ceremonies, livestock was highly involved. As Herskovits⁷ notes, the livestock attachment intervened at one point or another in the ceremonies concerned with the birth of a child among the Akamba. For instance, there was the use of milk and the imposition of milk-taboos on the mother before the birth of her child. On the day after the birth of a child, the family would have a feast; a he-goat would be slaughtered for the celebration, or, if the family was well-to-do, an ox would be slaughtered. The skin of this animal could not be sold or given away; the woman would use it to sleep on, or her husband would make clothes for her from it. If it is disposed of, a strip would be cut from it and fastened to the skin in which the child is carried on its mother's back. If the new born was a boy, he would be allotted a bull by his parents as a gift. This bull would be exchanged with a female cow later to ensure that it multiplies. Other relatives, both paternal and maternal would also give the child gifts in terms of livestock. This was mostly in terms of goats and sheep. This means that a boy would begin building his stock right from birth simply by taking advantage of the livestock gifts allotted to him by his parents and relatives.

³ Katola, M. "The Akamba Concept of Taboo with Particular Reference to Machakos District". M.A Thesis, Kenyatta University. (1987).

⁴ Lindblom, G. *The Akamba in British East Africa*.

⁵ Muthiani, J. *Akamba from Within: Egalitarianism in Social Relations*. New York: Exposition Press. (1973).

⁶ Hopley, C.W. *Ethnology of Akamba and Other East African Tribes*. (London, 1971), 22.

⁶ Oliver, S. "Individuality, Freedom of Choice, and Cultural Flexibility of the Kamba". *American Anthropologist, New Series*, Vol. 67, No. 2. (1965). ⁶¹ OI Muvinya Makau at Katheka on 11/11/2020.

⁷ Herskovits, M. "The Cattle Complex in East Africa". *American Anthropologist, New Series*, Vol. 28, No. 3. (1926), 498.

As far as initiation ceremonies (nzaiko) were concerned, livestock played a very crucial role. The father to the *mwaikwa* had to pay a certain fee to the performer of the rite. The fee was a bull or a certain number of goats agreed by the father of the *mwaikwa* and the performer (*mwaiki*). If a man was too poor and could not afford this fee, he would postpone the circumcision of his children till he could raise the fee.⁸

On the material day, the elders would have good supplies of meat around a fire place. The animals to be slaughtered for these elders would be provided by the parents to the *mwaikwa* as a payment for the privilege of going through the ceremony. The fathers to the *mwaikwa* could also use this opportunity to buy a higher rank in the council of elders (*Nzama*) by providing more animals for slaughtering as compared to the others. This gesture would appease the elders who would then consider them for higher ranks. The animals provided during these ceremonies were eaten in common. The animals were cut up according to certain principles, since members of the lower status were never allowed to eat of all parts of an animal. None of the meat set apart for consumption on this occasion would be taken home to the villages. Only the elders could crack the bones to get at the marrow and all bones would be collected and burnt at their fire. Anyone who broke this rule would be fined several goats.⁹ After the initiation, the *aikwa* would be given gifts in terms of livestock by the parents, relatives, neighbours and also the friends to the relatives.

After circumcision, the boys entered the age-grade called *Nthele*. Once in this age grade, they were considered mature and ready to marry. Their main duty was to defend the society and also bring wealth to the society through the culturally sanctioned cattle raids against their neighbours. In fact, according to Lindblom¹⁰, the institution of circumcision was used to inculcate in the minds of male initiates the sanctity of raiding.

The *Nthele* would look after goats and sheep or calves, he would learn how to pen them, learn where the best pasture was to be found and where to take the cattle for watering. His father would show him the different salty clays which should be given to cattle and also which plants were edible, poisonous or used as medicine to the cattle. The boy would also learn how to distinguish domestic animals by their colour. It was also a must for him to learn all the colours and shades, the shape of their horns, and sometimes their origin (for example, paid in bride price, given as a gift or kept for someone else.¹¹ This exemplifies the central role played by livestock in the initiation ceremony among the Akamba.

Another example rite of passage where livestock intervened was the marriage institution. Livestock occupied an integral part in marriage institution as it was used for the payment of bride-price. Traditionally, the bride-price, known among the Akamba as *Ngasya*, was paid in terms of cows and goats. There was no standard amount set for bride-price but it was a common practise that the girl's bride-price should be the same as that of her mother's. However, it was the number of goats that varied not cows, unless one counted cows in place of goats.⁶⁷

The father (or the lineage) was responsible for acquiring the first wife for each son. A young man depended on the good will of his father for the payment of the bride price, hence the father determined whether his son would get a second wife or not. Sometimes the livestock for the sons' dowry was acquired through dowry payments for their sisters. In some instances, the capacity of a man to marry more than one wife would be determined by his wealth rather than his father's. Those who could afford to pay *Ngasya* (bride-price) could marry another wife. And in most cases, only old established men could afford the luxury of more than one wife. In this case, if a man was wealthy enough (which meant having a huge flock of livestock), and could afford to pay the bride-price, he took a second wife with the consent of his parents and, of course, that of his first wife. Therefore, men ensured both

⁸ Hobley, C. *Ethnology of A-Kamba*, 68.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lindblom, G. *The Akamba in British East Africa*.

¹¹ V.G. Simiyu, "Traditional Methods of Education in East Africa". *Présence Africaine Editions. Nouvelle série*, No. 87. (1973), 186. ⁶⁷ Muthiani, J. *Akamba From Within*.

the material and biological reproduction of their lineages through what Sheriff¹² calls "their control over the means of production, cattle and procreating women". Thus, individuals used livestock to expand their lineages and to create allies or clients.

Indeed, Munro¹³ thinks that the increase in Akamba raiding activities in the late nineteenth century was partly due to a desire on the part of the Akamba to acquire cattle and women. In support of this, Watt¹⁴, who was living in Machakos in the early 1890s, records that the Akamba raided the great Masai clan, and carried off, not only their cattle, but also in many instances, their women and maidens.

The Akamba also used livestock to offer sacrifices to their ancestors and also to *Mulungu* (God). Mbiti¹⁶ contends that the Akamba made sacrifices to God on occasions such as at the rites of passage, planting time, before crops ripen, during their first harvest, when holding a purification ceremony after an epidemic and most of all, when the rains failed or delayed. Therefore, there was to be a good reason to occasion the offering of sacrifices among the traditional Akamba.

The Akamba had different sacrificial animals such as; oxen, sheep, goats and chicken. This depended on what the *Mundu Mue* (medicine man) advised. Whatever the animal to be sacrificed, it had to be of one colour, never spotted or striped and one without any deformity (*kiema*). The offerings comprised certain foodstuffs such as "*ngima*" (stiff porridge). This was made from finger millet and smeared with a lot of ghee, and drinks such as the traditional beer (liquor) and water.¹⁵

When the need for a sacrifice was identified, the elders consulted the medicine men or women (diviners), and if he or she agreed, the day for the sacrifice would be set. When the sacrifice was made for a certain family, the sacrificial animal would be offered by that particular family. However, when the sacrifice was meant for several homesteads (*utui*) the sacrificial animal would be provided by each *Mutumia wa Ithembo* (the elder of the shrine).¹⁶

On the day of the sacrifice, the *Atumia ma Ithembo* along with their wives took the sacrificial animal to the place of sacrifice where they slaughtered the animal in the presence of all the members of the homestead. Then the blood would be mixed with beer and poured out at the foot of the tree or at the sacrificial grove, while uttering some prayers for rain, the end of famine or for healing from an epidemic, or whatever the community need was. In Akamba sacrifice, women had an active role to play. The elder wives of the *Atumia ma Ithembo* offered the women's sacrifice of food that they brought and placed at the spot where the mixture of blood and beer had been poured out. After the sacrifice, the elders (both men and women) ate the meat first and then shared it out to all those present.¹⁷ It is thus clear from the foregoing description that the social fabric and organization of the Akamba was closely mediated by the livestock economy of the community during the pre-colonial period.

During all these functions and feasts, the age classes, gender and seniority in the council of elders were considered in the distribution of meat. When an animal was slaughtered, the meat was divided into different parts and there were specific parts to be given to different groups of the members of the family according to gender, age and other positions held in the family. It was not permissible for anyone to touch meat that fell to the share of those at higher grades, even if the elders were not taking part in the feast. The portions of elders of the highest grade were taken to their villages by the *anake*, who slaughtered animals and prepared the meat. Women and the youth ate certain parts of an animal.

¹² Sheriff, A. "Social Formations in Pre-colonial Kenya", in B.A. Ogot (Ed). *Kenya in the 19th Century*. Nairobi: Bookwise. (1985).

¹³ J.F. Munro, *Colonial Rule and the Akamba*, 26-27.

¹⁴ Watts, M. "On the Poverty of Theory". Natural Hazard Research Context" in K. Hewitt (Ed), *Interpretations of Calamity from the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*. (Boston, 1893), 223. ¹⁶ Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann. (1969).

¹⁵ Mutunga, R. "The Akamba Traditional Religion and Christianity: A Philosophical Study". Master of Arts in Philosophy in the University of Nairobi. (1994), 122-124.

¹⁶ Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. (Nairobi, 1987), 59.

¹⁷ Mutunga, R. "The Akamba Traditional Religion and Christianity".

Women ate legs, the stomach, and the meat on sides of the belly while the youth ate neck, lungs, liver, kidney and the heart.¹⁸ All the other parts were reserved for the *atumia*. This only means that the Akamba were conversant with the anatomy of the animals.

3. POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The smallest unit of the Akamba political organization was the *Musyi* (homestead or family). It was also the smallest unit of both political and territorial organization. From the family, the next political unit was the clan which was under the *Nzama* (Council of elders). The affairs of the clan were therefore in the hands of the *Nzama*.

Appointment to the the *nzama* was determined by the age-class of an individual which inturn was dictated by the life-cycle of an individual. A Mkamba life-cycle was divided into a number of age classes corresponding to age and cultural development. He began life as *Kana* (child), then went on to become a *Kavisi* (little boy) then a *Kivisi* (boy), a *Mwanake* (warrior), *Nthele* (young married man) and finally Mutumia (elder). The first stage of manhood was that of the *mwanake*, which may best be interpreted as "warrior." It was often taken to mean an unmarried man, but this is not so, for so long as a man took part in the ordinary dances he was designated a *mwanake*, and he would dance until he reached the stage when he was called *nthele*. Both the *mwanake* and the *nthele* used to take part in the raids and fights to protect the clan.¹⁹ The next degrees were those of the elders, the junior degree of which was *Mutumia wa Kisuka* (men's club). The duties of these elders were principally the digging of graves and disposing of corpses. After this came the *Mutumia wa Nzama* (elder of the council), and, finally, *Mutumia wa Ithembo* (the elder of the shrine), whose main duty was to make sacrifices to God on different occasions.²⁰

Not all Atumia were members of the Council of Elders. In fact, the Atumia grade did not in itself carry with it the right to a seat in the council of elders. Any Mutumia who wished to be admitted in the council of elders had to make a special payment to the sitting council members and had to be a member of the immediate lower grade. This was usually a bull. In fact, Lambert²³ notes that the attainment of a higher grade among the *Atumia* was chiefly a question of economic means. In other words, having a huge flock of livestock and wives. Apart from wealth, other considerations were made. For instance, age was an important factor. It was not common for middle-aged Mutumia to be part of the council of elders. This was a preserve for the senior members of the clan. The experience and knowledge of clan traditions were also considered. It was the sitting council members who had the right to appoint and determine the suitability of the new recruits.²⁴ Once a man fulfilled all the other criteria, he was fit to be an elder. The *Nzama* elders then declared such a person an elder upon payment of the required fee to the members of the *Nzama*.

However, as Lindblom²⁵ notes, even in the same *Nzama*, seniority of an elder was not automatically acquired but was determined by the number of animal payments made. The most junior member normally being one who had just paid his entrance fee, and was usually indicated by the portion of the slaughtered beast to which a member was entitled to at the feast. This grade was easily reached by the presentation of a goat to the members of the *nzama* (council). The person presenting the goat assumed the right to eat a goat's head, and was called *Mutumia wa Mutwe* (elder of the head). The next grade was gained by giving a bull, which entitled one to the meat of the animal's lower leg. Another bull gave him the right to the upper part of the leg. When he was in a position to present another one, he advanced further. A forth bull entitled one to eat from the hump, which was considered a great delicacy. A fifth and last bull was paid before one may eat of the tongue and head of cattle. An elder of the fifth grade had gained the right to eat all kinds of meat. To pass through different grades among

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ OI Musyoka Nzila at Mitaboni on 03/11/2020.

²⁰ Dundas, C. "The Organization and Laws of Some Bantu Tribes in East Africa". *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 45. (1915). ²³ Lambert, H. E. "Land Tenure among the Akamba", 139-42. ²⁴ Manzi, J. "A Biography of Senior Chief Solomon Kasina Wa Ndo".²⁵ Lindblom, G. *The Akamba in British East Africa*, 145.

the Akamba was known as *kukula* (climb).²¹ When a man had made sufficient payments to entitle him to be in the highest seat, then he would stop paying. In practice a man who had attained the highest level in the council refused to make a further payment and stayed in that position till his son removed him.²²

Nzama played several functions. Among the key functions of the *Nzama* was to decide on the raiding expeditions. The council of elders had to give permission before any raiding or war expedition could be carried out. After they gave their consent, experienced warriors, who were normally of the age-set of *Anake* and *Nthele*, were selected as leaders of the raiding mission. The selected members then acquired the title *Athiani*, (*singular, Muthiani*). These were the so called *Athiani*, but their authority was only temporary, and in times of peace, they occupied no public position in the clan. The *Nzama* institution also ensured that the Akamba pastoral resources were utilized by all herders in the most appropriate way. It ensured the maintenance of a just land tenure system, rangeland management strategies and regulation of pasture and watering points.

Apart from the political hierarchy, the Akamba also had the territorial hierarchy. *Musyi* was the smallest territorial unit. Several *Misyi* made up wider territorial units, a village (*utui pl Motui*). Several *Motui* were combined into a unit called *Kivalo*. Generally, claims to land were agreed upon and regulated by the *utui* elders. They could limit the amount of grazing land an individual appropriated or refuse to admit certain individuals into their *utui*.²³ Consequently, a prospective settler offered beer and a goat (*mbui ya mathanzu*) to older settlers. These items were used in a ceremony in which the new settler took an oath. (*The ndundu oath*), thereby committing himself and his household to co-operation in *utui* affairs.

Such co-operation was important for defending frontier settlements from raids and for reciprocal obligations, especially in labour. The Akamba valued such cooperation to the extent that if one refused to cooperate with the *utui* members, he would be abandoned in the time of need. The saying *mundu ni andu* (a person is people) strongly implies that no one could live without the assistance of other people. Indeed, the oral Akamba traditions include a cautionary story of the dangers of self isolation of any clan member. The story is about a young man; a local resident named Mwilile who managed in rapid succession to acquire substantial herds and married several wives. He felt that he was now rich enough and did not require the other members of the society. He moved away from the hillside settlements and isolated himself somewhat from the community. He looked down upon his neighbours. The contempt that he apparently felt for his poorer neighbors is conveyed in the memory that he permitted his livestock to trample their fields. But in his preoccupation with acquiring property, Mwilile neglected to provide adequate protection for his livestock which could only be achieved through cooperation with fellow *utui* members. When raiders struck and he sent out the alarm, his neighbors are said to have responded, "*You are a strong man, go and take your cattle back.*"²⁴ Hence, all his livestock was raided and he became poor and miserable.

The cooperation among the *utui* members was also seen during the establishment of syengo (cattle posts). Establishing syengo was a collective affair where the village elders had to agree. Where a *mundu muthwii* (rich man) had enough cattle to send to an individual *kyengo*, there was still the same ritual for collective sending of *kyengo*. Thus, as far as the Akamba were concerned, nobody could send a livestock to a *kyengo* alone. All the village elders were involved.²⁵

Apart from the political and territorial leaders, there was also a special class of persons called the *Athiani* (warrior leaders). They did not fall anywhere in the leadership hierarchy but they were influential enough to command some considerable following. These were people with special skills in leading raiding and hunting expeditions. Their primary task was to protect the community in various capacities. They went around looking for water sites at which the community could settle. They led

²¹ OI, Mulei Ndungi at Muthesya on 08/11/2020.

²² Lindblom, G. *The Akamba in British East Africa*, 145.

²³ Penwill, D.J. *Kamba Customary Law*.

²⁴ OI.Tabitha Kilonzo at Matuu on 30/10/2020.

²⁵ Mutiso, C.G.M. "Kitui Livestock", 3.

the community in clearing of new areas for settlement and grazing and they also led in the raiding for livestock and fighting off the enemies. In the latter part of the 19th century, the military function of the *Athiani* came to dominate. They were most exclusively used to ward off the Maasai and spy on Maasai livestock and Maasai raiders.²⁶ It has been argued that people who had the skills of a *Muthiani* were in a position to attract followers and that it was through such followers that large commercial caravans would be organised.³²

Such men acquired a lot of wealth and even gained power over the *Nzama*. These tendencies became particularly pronounced toward the end of the 19th century when a series of new leaders emerged in frontier communities. These leaders drew clients and dependants of various ethnic and lineage backgrounds into lineage based settlements in which individual loyalty and obligation formed an increasingly fundamental element of social structure. Mwatu wa Ngoma was undoubtedly the most well-known of these leaders. As a youth, he lived in the densely populated Ulu Hills, but like a number of his ambitious contemporaries, Mwatu moved east to Mwala, in the open country between Ulu and Kitui. Mwala offered opportunity with its ample grazing land and access to the major trade route that crossed the region through Kitui. He was successful enough to break through the structural impediments to the exercise of personal power, carving out for himself a small personal fief. By the mid-1880s, Mwatu had earned a reputation as a distinguished warrior and local leader. With the cattle he acquired in raiding and trade, he was able to make advantageous marriage alliances and clientship arrangements.

At the same time, Mwatu used his growing contacts with coastal traders and later with the British at Machakos, to expand his influence further and build up his military strength. With a few firearms and a growing number of warriors including some Maasai recruits, Mwatu increased his raiding. As he acquired still more cattle, he was able to enlarge his immediate following and extend his influence over a wider circle of lineage villages. By the mid-1890s, Mwatu wa Ngoma had become in effect the head of a small predatory state. Warriors under his command raided very widely for livestock and captives, expanding Mwatu's wealth and sphere of support, while at the same time disrupting movement along the important routes linking Mount Kenya with Ulu, Kitui, and Mwingi.²⁷

4. ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION

The Akamba, like other pre-colonial African societies depended on livestock production for their livelihood. The animals kept by the Akamba included cattle, goats and sheep. Livestock keeping was more valued in terms of social qualities as well as their economic values. Thus those people who had animal wealth had a high prestige, with cattle the most prestigious. Therefore, people who kept large herds of cattle were held in great respect. In other words, animal wealth defined the social status of a person. Hence, livestock were „vital to the ladder of social status which most men essayed to climb at some time in their lives.²⁸

The larger the herd one possessed, the more he was able to cope with emergencies without seriously depleting the size of his herd. Even more important was the fact that livestock were not only source of consumption goods but also an agency for protection, sustenance and perpetuation of labour. Ambler²⁹ argues that wealth and influence were inextricably intertwined in the societies of central Kenya (implying Kamba, kikuyu and Maasai). Since land was freely available, prosperity and security depended essentially on access to and control over labor. A fact that was illustrated in the popular aphorism *andu ni indo*, “people are livestock” in this case, livestock was the only form of wealth. So it can also be translated to mean that “people are wealth.”

²⁶ Ambler, C. “Population Movement, Social Formation and Exchange”, 220.

³² OI.Tabitha Kilonzo at Matuu on 30/10/2020.

²⁷ OI.Tabitha Kilonzo at Matuu on 30/10/2020.

²⁸ Ambler, C. *Kenya Communities in the Age of Imperialism*, 26.

²⁹ Ibid.

As Ndege³⁰ argues, cattle accumulation was not an end in itself but practised in order to transform these cattle into human beings, thereby increasing the size of the social group and the amount of labour power at the command of an individual. Thus, individuals used livestock to expand their lineages and to create friends or clients. Indeed, among the Akamba, there was a phrase *andu ni indo* which showed the extent to which the Akamba valued livestock. "*Andu ni indo*" could be translated to mean not only "people are wealth" but it also means "people are livestock."³¹ The scale of livestock accumulation was the surest indicator of wealth in nineteenth-century central Kenya.³² Thus, men built up their bases of wealth first by expanding their families, generally by marrying additional wives and sometimes through the adoption of dependents.³⁹ They gained control over more labor through hire, through the development of patron-client relationships, and through the manipulation of social obligations.⁴⁰ For example, the poor settled around a wealthy stock-owner so that they could obtain milk from his compound, in return they helped him with like livestock work, farm-work and in other activities.³³ Wealth was self-perpetuating. Access to labor gave a man the resources to enhance his stature and develop a following. Because his household could produce more food and livestock, a relatively rich man was in the position to reward workers and offer them the hospitality of beer parties and feasts that was an essential part of building a position of leadership. Ownership of large numbers of livestock allowed wealthy individuals to obtain yet more wives, clients, and other dependents.

In addition, livestock was also the most important form of saving in the Akamba economy. At the subsistence level, cattle provided the essential foods which included meat, milk, ghee, blood and butter. The herd also acted as a bank from which resources could be drawn to satisfy certain urgent needs like purchasing grain in times of food scarcity.³⁴ In case of severe famine, cattle would be driven to Kikuyu land to be exchanged with grain. For instance Jackson³⁵ notes that the precolonial trade categorised under the heading *kuthuua*³⁶ involved the selling of livestock and livestock products by the Akamba to the Akikuyu in order to obtain grains and tubers such as beans, maize, yams and arrowroots. However, the Akamba viewed their cattle as an attractive piece of investment and they would only exchange them for grain as their last resort when they didn't have any other commodity to give out in exchange for grain.³⁷ In fact, those who exchanged grain for cattle were always at an advantage. As Kitching⁴⁶ generally notes about pre-colonial Kenyan communities, "the rates of exchange between the livestock, food crops and artisan products were generally in favour of the livestock owner. This was because the volume of millet which was exchanged for one cow or goat was normally a product of more labour than that expended on rearing livestock. This may explain why the Akamba were most reluctant to exchange their cattle for grain and why they were so eager to recover them when the harvest was good.

Cattle also served as an insurance against crop failure because seasons of low rainfall did not always result in scarcity of pasture. Moreover, in times of drought, cattle recovered fast after the onset of rains and provided milk and blood long before any crops could provide food.³⁸ Besides cattle, the Akamba also kept large flocks of goats, sheep, and chicken. These were to a larger extent the main source of currency besides serving subsistence, ritual and even 'medicinal' purposes. Apart from meat,

³⁰ Ndege, G. "The Transformation of Cattle Economy in Rongo Division", 37.

³¹ OI. Tabitha Kilonzo at Matuu on 30/10/2020

³² Stanner, E. "*The Kitui Akamba. A study of British Colonial Administration in East Africa*".³⁹ Krapf, J.L. *Travels, Researches and Missionary Labours*, 355. ⁴⁰ Ambler, C. H. *Kenya Communities in the Age of Imperialism*.

³³ OI Musembi Joseph at Ngelani on 07/11/2020.

³⁴ Ambler, C. H. *Kenya Communities in the Age of Imperialism*.

³⁵ Jackson, K.A. "An Ethnohistorical Study of the Oral Traditions of the Akamba of Kenya".

³⁶ *Kuthuua* literally means „buying food“

³⁷ Mutie, P. "In Spite of Difference: Making sense of the Coexistence between the Akamba and the Maasai peoples of Kenya". Ph.D. Dissertation, Bielefeld University. (2003), 154. ⁴⁶ Kitching, G. *Class and Economic Change in Kenya*, 203.

³⁸ R. Matheka, "The Political Economy of Famine".

goats gave milk, which was used only to supplement the commonly used cow milk. In addition, the fat-tailed African type of sheep was also used to supplement meat, and its fat was used for cooking, seasoning and also for ceremonial rituals.³⁹ At the same time, animal skins were used as baby cribs, knife-sheaths, quivers, men's hats and bags as well as sandals. They were also used as clothes and bedding after intensive beating and conditioning.⁴⁰ Thus we can conclude that the pre-colonial Akamba livestock economy was reliable and self-sufficient.

5. CONCLUSION

The paper set out to examine the place of livestock in the social, economic and political organization of the Akamba of Machakos during the pre-colonial period. The study established that livestock was a very significant component in the social organization of the Akamba. The significance of livestock in the social system was well expressed in social structures and institutions. The Akamba livestock attachment intervened at one point or another in the ceremonies concerned with all their social structures and functions. These ceremonies included birth, initiation, weddings, death and burials, offerings among others. In the political pillar, the study established that livestock was very crucial in determining who could become a member of the council of elders. For instance, those who contributed more livestock to the *Nzama* stood higher chance of becoming elders and vice versa. The study also revealed that the economic organization of the Akamba during the pre-colonial period was highly influenced by livestock ownership as livestock provided the people with basic food requirements. In addition, it was the main commodity of exchange between the Akamba and their neighbours. Livestock acted as a bank and store of wealth and men with large herds were held high in the society. More importantly, livestock was a means through which the Akamba community reproduced itself. This was done through payment of bride wealth to acquire a wife who would in turn give birth to children. The foregoing indicates that livestock economy influenced the socio-economic and political structure of the Akamba during the precolonial period.

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³⁹ Manzi, J. "A Biography of Senior Chief Solomon Kasina Wa Ndo".

⁴⁰ OI. Musyoka Ndolo at Mbiuni on 01/11/2020.

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