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Peasant Response to Agricultural Innovations: Land Consolidation, Agrarian Diversification and Technical Change. The Case of Bungoma District in Western Kenya, 1954-1960.

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Introduction

Two perspectives have dominated analyses of peasant societies. Traditional analyses subscribed to the view that capital and state policies exercise a very limited impact (if any) on rural agrarian economies (Hyden 1980; 1983). African peasant societies were perceived as conditioned by a moral economy that rendered them both resistant to and repelled by innovation and change (Ibid., 1980, 18). More recent analyses project the contrary view in favor of peasants' ability to spontaneously respond to economic innovations and incentives (Prahalad 2005; Chambers 2005, 159; Maxon 2003; Hill 1997). This article utilizes the case study of Bungoma district¹ in western Kenya to argue that analyses in the first genre grossly underestimated the propensity of African rural households to respond to economic incentives positively, with a view to modernizing their agrarian economies. On the contrary, I advance the thesis that African peasant households are dynamic and adaptable to agrarian innovations granted that they are adequately sensitized to the fact that such innovations will contribute to their economic well-being. Furthermore, this article shows that peasant receptivity to agrarian innovations has wider implications both in terms of policy formulation and overall efforts at rural transformation. The case of Bungoma demonstrates that so long as appropriate policies are formulated by state agencies, peasant households can become effective instruments of rural transformation. Moreover, studies treating agrarian change in Kenya's rural areas have tended to be lopsided in favor of central Kenya.² Western Kenya has often attracted attention more as a reservoir of labor power than as a producer of agricultural surpluses (Wolff 1974, 92, 139; Fearn 1961, 62, 151). Thus, utilizing the case example of Bungoma district and employing mainly primary sources, I challenge the notion of western Kenya as a reservoir of labor power rather than as a producer of agricultural surpluses.

The context of the article is situated within the policy debate that preoccupied the Department of Agriculture in colonial Kenya with regard to how best to transform the rural areas, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War. In this debate, the view that eventually held sway sought to promote greater rural agrarian commercialization through a system of rewards that would appeal to the emerging middle class of African farmers in the rural reserves, thereby facilitating the voluntary support of the colonial state's agricultural betterment campaign. The fundamental idea was to prop up the middle-class farmer, bestow him with a stake in the colonial political economy, and thus prevent his possible alliance with subversive rural elements (Berman 1990, 366).³ Thus, the colonial state employed the mechanism of co-opting the forces of rural commercialization through the strategies of land consolidation, enclosure, and widening the scope of African involvement in growing high-value cash crops. The focus of this article, therefore, is on the middle class of African rural households in Bungoma district who responded quite positively to these agricultural innovations. In a sense, therefore, this article validates Robert Chambers's contention that innovations which rural farmers can manage, and which they find are good, spread very rapidly. (Chambers 1983, 92).

The Swynnerton Plan and the Origins of Land Consolidation

On 24 September 1953, a meeting with Provincial Commissioners was held at the governor's house in Nairobi. During this meeting, the colonial state decided that a five-

year plan be drawn up, with the aim of accelerating agricultural development in African land units within Kenya (Swynnerton 1954, 9). The state also proposed an interest-free loan amounting to approximately £5,000,000, procured from the metropolitan government in London, as essential in bringing this anticipated plan to fruition.⁴ It was against this background that towards the end of 1953, Assistant Director of Agriculture R. J. M. Swynnerton was called upon to prepare a comprehensive five-year plan for the intensification and development of African agriculture. The plan was endorsed and accepted by the Kenyan government as the framework within which the development of African agriculture should proceed. Following these developments, Her Majesty's government in the United Kingdom made a grant of £5,000,000 to meet a significant part of the costs of implementing the plan. By the end of 1953, this had set the stage for what the Department of Agriculture described as "a new era in African agriculture" (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1954, 40).

The Recommendations of the Swynnerton Plan

The outcome of R. J. M. Swynnerton's efforts was the publication in 1954 of a blueprint for the development of African agriculture in Kenya, *A Plan to Intensify the Development of African Agriculture in Kenya*. Taking precedence among Swynnerton's proposals was a program of land tenure reform, which emerged as a critical prerequisite to the development of sound agricultural practices in African areas. One goal of tenure reform was to give the African farmer a unit of land that would permit a system of farming with sufficient productivity to support households at levels commensurate with other occupations. The Swynnerton Plan faulted the customary and prevalent African land tenure systems not only for aggravating problems of land fragmentation, but also for hampering the adoption, development, and diffusion of sound and intensified farming procedures such as crop rotations, the carting and application of manure, and the establishment and management of grass leys (Swynnerton 1954: 9). The necessity to undertake land tenure reform was emphasized: "A sound system of land tenure is of such importance to agricultural development that the Director of Agriculture should always be invited to meetings of the Native Lands Trust Board and of the African Affairs Committee when land tenure and legislation affecting it are under consideration" (Ibid., 10). The amalgamation of land holdings through consolidation was also deemed an important aid to the campaign to conserve the soil, which had constituted a pivotal component of the policy of the Department of Agriculture and the colonial state.⁵ If land tenure reform lead not only to the consolidation of existing land units, but also to security of tenure by giving the process legal backing through the issue of title certificates, this would stimulate the growth of a rural middle class eager to support the agricultural betterment campaign. It was envisaged by the Department of Agriculture, and by the Swynnerton Plan, that as this rural middle class grew, it would act as an important source of diffusion for agricultural innovations (Throup 1988, 210).

It followed, therefore, that another important recommendation contained in the Swynnerton Plan related to providing security of tenure to Africans through land registration and the acquisition of an "indefeasible" title (Swynnerton 1954, 9). The importance attached to such security was that it would promote and motivate a greater investment of labor and capital in the development of individual farms. Moreover, a process of land registration would create a market in land, thereby enabling farmers to

procure financial credit through the offering of land as collateral or security to financial institutions (Ibid.).

Another key aspect of the Swynnerton Plan that derived directly from the foregoing emphasis on land tenure reform was fostering individual farm planning by providing technical advice to farmers in African reserves. Thus, rather than regarding consolidation and enclosure as ends in themselves, these reforms were to herald the onset of a major agrarian transformation in African reserves. Hence, once the holdings were consolidated, it was necessary to devise plans that could be translated into more efficient farming. To this end, the Department of Agriculture had established research stations to study the problems and requirements of farming as appropriate in the specific ecological zones. The farm planning that followed this process included giving the farmer a simple layout which guided him to follow the general pattern of farming congenial to the specific zone in question (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1962, 241).

Land Consolidation and Enclosure in Bungoma District

Bungoma district presented a case of relatively sparse population in relation to the land—a factor that rendered the area more amenable to efforts at land consolidation.⁶ According to the North Nyanza district annual report for 1954, the fragmentation of the land and uneconomic subdivision of holdings were only major obstacles to introducing better farming methods in the more thickly populated areas (North Nyanza Annual Report 1954). The case of Bungoma, where population was sparse, implied that greater emphasis would be placed upon the improvement in farming methods compared to land consolidation, although this did not suggest a complete neglect of the latter. Therefore, the practical manifestations of the recommendations of the Swynnerton Plan, particularly as pertains to the positive effects associated with large consolidated land units, were prominent as early as 1954. The Bungoma District Commissioner observed in the district's annual report for 1954 that the elementary lessons, which had been so patiently and repeatedly conveyed for a number of years, were now showing signs of bearing much fruit. The need for adequate soil conservation measures, resting arable land under grass leys, and manufacturing and applying adequate quantities of manure to fields were now generally recognized to such an extent that these agricultural measures were practiced as an end in themselves rather than as a means to obtain a reward for good husbandry, as had been the case previously (Ibid.).

The widespread and voluntary adoption of these measures among households in Bungoma district influenced a general feeling in the District Commissioner that “the scheme of direct assistance and subsidies to farmers had run its course and achieved the results for which it had been created” (Ibid.). Indeed, during that year (1954), the number of rewards for good husbandry was drastically reduced to 220 from 990 in the previous year (Ibid.). Consequently, future aid for carrying out improvements in farming would be extended “mainly through the provision of loans rather than grants” (Ibid.)—testifying further to the extent to which the recommendations of the Swynnerton Plan were already impacting official policy in relation to rural agrarian change. As the annual report of the Department of Agriculture confirmed during the same year: “Within the framework of existing services augmented by staff and funds provided under the Swynnerton Plan, good progress was made during the year in developing the African farmer and increasing his potential production” (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1954, 51). Farm planning

emerged as one of the salient means to develop the African farmer and augment his potential production.

The Advent of Farm Planning

The inception of the Swynnerton Plan in 1954 was closely followed by the inauguration of farm planning in North Nyanza district, when a farm planning organization was started during the same year based on the experience gained in Nyeri district (Nyanza Province Annual Report 1954). North Nyanza district's annual report recognized this development as heralding the change from "the elementary to the intermediate stage in the introduction of improved farming methods" (North Nyanza Annual Report 1954, 19). By the end of 1954, ten planning teams were in action in North Nyanza district, supervised by the Assistant Agricultural Officer and supported by a central office, where farm plans were drawn up. As described in the district's annual report, there was no doubt that the process of farm planning was not only elaborate, it also required skilled personnel. Contoured plans of a farm were prepared prior to the fields being laid out by the farm planner. The plan included a key that depicted the crops to be grown and the rotation to be practiced annually. It was also necessary that the applicant for a farm plan be the owner of a farm which was of economic size (Ibid.).

In addition, the intended beneficiary of farm planning services needed to satisfy an officer of the Department of Agriculture that he possessed the required knowledge and determination to put the plan into practice. Care was also taken to make certain that the boundaries claimed by the applicant were not a subject of dispute. Finally, a survey and planning fee of two shillings per acre was levied, although this payment did not cover the full cost of the work done, and the applicant had to sign a commitment to the effect that should he fail to carry out the plan within five years, he would be required to pay the full cost of the survey (Ibid.). These conditions clearly demonstrate a desire on the part of the colonial state to capture and co-opt a specific cadre of farmers in Kenya's rural areas—the rural middle class.

These stringent conditions notwithstanding, the idea of farm planning was spontaneously received by households in Bungoma district, owing without doubt to the relatively larger acreages that characterized this region. As the District Commissioner observed in his annual report, "The idea has caught on well, especially in the Northern and Western divisions and a considerable waiting list had been built up by the end of the year. The fact that only consolidated holdings of seven acres or more will be accepted has given an additional incentive to the more progressive farmers to bring about consolidation by purchase and exchange" (Ibid.). These sentiments were largely in tune with the findings of the Department of Agriculture during the same year. With a specific focus on progress in improved farming in African areas during 1954, this annual report indicated that the planning of farms in North Nyanza had been met with great enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm was evidenced by the fact that by the end of the year, 110 farms had been surveyed and of these farms, a total of 4,025 acres had been planned. Many of these farms were large, and the greatest demand for farm planning had been witnessed in the Bukusu areas of the Northern division and also in the Western division (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1954, 51).

This trend persisted during the subsequent years, reflecting the continued capacity for innovation and adaptation among Bungoma households. The Department of

Agriculture's 1955 annual report credited the good progress that had been made in farming in African areas to the fact that the extra staff and funds provided by the Swynnerton Plan were having the desired effect (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1955, 46). The Department was thus optimistic that the stage had now been set for rapid strides in the next few years (Ibid.). The positive response of Bungoma farmers to the imperatives of agrarian change was undoubtedly a significant factor influencing such optimistic views. With a focus on Nyanza province as a whole, it was reported in 1955 that North Nyanza continued to lead the province in better farming. In this area, a total of 168 farms were surveyed for farm planning, of which 128 plans were implemented, covering a total of 5,831 acres. Demand was highest in what was now Elgon Nyanza district, and many farmers were making very hopeful progress there (Ibid.).⁷

Reinforcing this assessment were the figures for farm planning in 1956, which clearly indicated that in Elgon Nyanza alone, 199 small holdings were surveyed and 66 planned (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1956, 46). It appeared that by this time, such tremendous progress in farming had been made that it was now generally thought more prudent to offer loan money to the farmer who wished to improve his farm, as this was more likely to induce a greater sense of responsibility compared to the pre-existing scheme of rewards for good husbandry (Ibid., 47). Consequently, although this rewards scheme had remained in operation in Elgon Nyanza, it was decided to discontinue these awards in 1958 (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1957, 49). In its 1959 annual report the Department of Agriculture provided a summary of the progress made in farming in such areas as Bungoma: "Agricultural development arising from planning and investment in recent years by government and private enterprise was evident in 1959 in the fields of land consolidation, farm planning and farm layouts. This has created the need for an increasing demand from farming communities for the expansion of research and advisory services to meet the problems thrown up by more intensive farming and to provide the guidance to raise yields" (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1959, 1).

Closely tied to the concept of farm planning was the emphasis placed upon land enclosure. Although by 1954 very few farms had been enclosed in North Nyanza district, the idea was receiving considerable impetus from the campaign for farm planning. As a result, the district's annual report predicted the possibility that "in the near future the practice of enclosing land may snowball" (North Nyanza Annual Report 1954, 21). Consequently, trials of suitable plants for line hedging were being given special attention in anticipation of such a high rate of land enclosure (Ibid.). The close affinity between farm planning and enclosure was further reiterated in 1955. Whereas the main emphasis of the work of the Department of Agriculture during that year was centered on farm planning, with Bungoma district proving to be the most progressive in this aspect of agrarian change, special emphasis had also been placed on the need to enclose land with perimeter hedges. In fact during this year, such enclosure of land with perimeter hedges had now been made a condition of obtaining a boundary certificate prior to farm planning (North Nyanza Annual Report 1955).

Existing archival sources suggest persistence in these two facets of rural agrarian change in subsequent years. Asserting that 1957 was "a year of consolidation," the Nyanza province annual report added that the most spectacular progress during the year was made in the field of land enclosure and consolidation. In Elgon Nyanza, "the gospel spread like the wind through the whole western division and by the end of the year was

taking place in all other locations” (Nyanza Province Annual Report 1957, 1). In 1958, on the other hand, the positive and voluntary response of African households to ongoing agrarian changes could be discerned from the following observations attributed to the Nyanza Provincial Commissioner: “It is pleasant to record that good progress was made in land consolidation in Elgon Nyanza and North Nyanza. Once again, these results were achieved at very low cost to government and with the whole-hearted cooperation of the people themselves” (Nyanza Province Annual Report 1958, 1). This evaluation was largely corroborated through the revelation in 1959 that “the demonstration provided by farm planning over past years is beginning to pay dividends in the more progressive areas such as Elgon Nyanza” (Nyanza Province Annual Report 1959, 17). On their own initiative, farmers in this area were starting to plan simple farm layouts which provided a useful example to their neighbors. Familiarity with farm planning over a number of years had given the farmers quite a sound idea of farm layout. The Provincial Commissioner thus expressed optimism that it would not be long before simple farm planning became as general as the Department of Agriculture’s soil conservation measures. By 1959, land enclosure was also identified as “a basic factor and this is now a flowing tide” (Ibid.). An indication of this progress can be gleaned from the following table, which shows the figures of total acreages enclosed and consolidated in relation to the number of farmers involved as of December 1959.

Table 1. Land Consolidation in Nyanza Province, 1959

District	No. of Farmers	Acreages enclosed/consolidated
North Nyanza	8,494	43,926
Central Nyanza	1,891	18,662
South Nyanza	833	18,511
Elgon Nyanza	15,075	274,510

Source: Nyanza Province Annual Report, 1959, KNA: PC/NZA/1/55

This table clearly demonstrates the leadership of Bungoma district (then called Elgon Nyanza) in land consolidation and enclosure, both in terms of the number of farmers involved and in the acreages enclosed. The district accounted for over 57% of the number of farmers and 77% of the acreages enclosed.

The emergence and upsurge of farmers clubs in Bungoma district during this phase in the development of Kenya’s colonial economy also reflected a continued positive response to the imperatives of agrarian transformation. In 1954, for instance, the District Commissioner lauded the formation of farmers clubs in the district as “a hopeful line of development” (North Nyanza Annual Report 1954, 20). These clubs consisted of groups of farmers who formed a club in order to afford each other, by cooperation, the

advantage of larger units. The first such club to be formed was the Yalusi Farmers Club in south Kimilili location (Ibid.). It consisted of eleven farmers occupying some 600 acres of land, all of whose farms had been planned (Ibid.). The 1955 North Nyanza annual report was categorical that the formation of farmers clubs had become popular in the northern parts of the district. Members of these clubs “regard themselves as aristocrats amongst their neighbors and give each other mutual support and even active help” (North Nyanza Annual Report 1955, 9). These clubs became central in materially assisting in disseminating better methods of farming through example to others (Ibid.). As the Nyanza province annual report during 1954 affirmed, “An interesting development in North Nyanza has been the formation of a number of farmer’s clubs all of whose farms have been planned and are being enclosed. So far, the advice given by the Agricultural Department has been carried out with energy” (Nyanza Province Annual Report 1954, 15).

The Impact of Land Consolidation and Enclosure on Farming Practice and Livelihoods

The impetus that sound farming practices in African areas derived from land consolidation and enclosure was already noticeable in the commentary of the Department of Agriculture as early as 1956.⁸ The Department recognized that Kenya’s African areas were undergoing the early stages of an agricultural revolution, the likes of which had not been seen in any other African country. According to the Agricultural advisor to the secretary of state, G. W. Nye, it was “difficult to write briefly and in moderation about the developments taking place in African agriculture in Kenya” at that time (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1956, 1). Thus, the Department of Agriculture began the new year on a very optimistic note in the knowledge that African agriculture was making “more rapid progress than would have been thought possible five, two, or even one year ago” (Ibid., 2).

As envisaged in the Swynnerton Plan, an important element of rural agrarian change that benefited directly from the drive for land consolidation and enclosure was the campaign to conserve soil fertility and to contain soil erosion. The process of land consolidation and enclosure appears to have removed some of the encumbrances to the soil erosion campaign so that there was a demonstrable change for the better from 1954 and beyond, when initiative and responsibility would gradually shift to the individual African cultivator. There was an interconnection between land enclosure and soil conservation because “on individual holdings there is an increasing awareness of the value of grass leys and improved pasture management. Wholesale improvement is unlikely to come about until enclosure of holdings has become general” (North Nyanza Annual Report 1954, 21).

Such improvement were quickly reflected by the fact that while in 1954, 7,570 miles of grass filter strips were marked out in North Nyanza to add to the construction of 180 miles of narrow based terraces on the contour to catch the run-off on the upper slopes of ridges and 193 miles of broad bench terraces which provided more permanent defenses against erosion, (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1954, 59-60), by 1955 it was clear that progress in the development of the African land units had been so remarkable that it had become the subject of very favorable comment by many well qualified visitors and observers (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1955, 1). Progress in soil conservation measures partly accounted for the leading role that North Nyanza continued to occupy in

relation to better farming within Nyanza province. In 1955, 6,410 miles of grass filter strips were marked out and in addition, 900 miles of narrow based terraces and 237 miles of bench terraces were constructed (Ibid.). In 1956, on the other hand, the measuring of grass strips continued in all areas within Elgon Nyanza and in general, soil conservation measures in most areas were reported to be adequate (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1956, 57). By 1957, the most striking advance with respect to progress in improved farming had been achieved in Elgon Nyanza, owing largely to the voluntary consolidation and demarcation of holdings (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1957, 49).

An important concomitant to this drive towards land enclosure had been the construction of cattle sheds⁹ and the use of manure on farms within Elgon Nyanza (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1957, 49). In the aftermath of the Second World War, deterioration in the fertility of the land following very intensive use made it imperative to incorporate livestock production with crop production into the pattern of African agriculture in such a way that the soil could be enriched while simultaneously yielding its maximum capacity (Talbot 1976, 100). In 1958, for example, Nyanza Provincial Commissioner confirmed that “cattle sheds are being built in rapidly growing numbers, and in this direction Elgon Nyanza leads the field. Elgon reports an increase of 4,000 cattle sheds during the year” (Nyanza Province Annual Report 1958, 14). Hence livestock farming became integrated into the overall rural agrarian reform program envisaged by the Swynnerton Plan. Moreover, the widespread use of hedges as a mechanism of soil erosion control was now acknowledged by the Department of Agriculture (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1959, 46), whose annual report for 1960 was therefore quite accurate when it asserted that spectacular advances had been made in recent years and that the agrarian sector was poised for even greater achievements in the future (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1960, 1).

Furthermore, land consolidation and enclosure appear to have stimulated tremendous interest in the application of artificial fertilizers among farmers in Bungoma district (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1954, 51). As early as 1954, the introduction of fertilizers had made some progress in North Nyanza, where farmers bought a total of ten tons of single super phosphate in 25-pound paper bags for application to their maize fields. Interest was mainly confined to the Kimilili area of Bungoma district. In this area, plans had been made for maize cooperatives to handle phosphate supplies in bulk during 1955 (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1955, 47) because, as the annual report of the Department of Agriculture confirmed in the following year, it had already been proven “that profitable increases in yield can be obtained from applications of phosphate” (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1956, 25). And in 1957, it was reported that “only in Elgon Nyanza did African producers buy fertilizers in any quantity” (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1957, 50). Tremendous increases in production that resulted from the adoption of such sound farming practices necessitated the strengthening and reorganization of institutions such as cooperative societies.

Consequently, the staff of the Cooperative Department was giving the noticeable rise in cooperative societies close attention as early as 1954 (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1954, 70). The Swynnerton Plan therefore provided for a fourfold increase in the number of cooperative officers and double the number of inspectors (Ibid.). Maize cooperative societies, which continued to flourish in Bungoma district, delivered 49,279 tons of maize to the agricultural produce control depot, more than double the amount

delivered in 1953 (Ibid.). In 1955, 24 new cooperative societies were started in Bungoma district and overall maize deliveries from the area now stood at 77,588 bags—constituting 14.36% of the total maize deliveries for Nyanza province as a whole (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1955, 63). By 1957, the continued prominence of cooperative societies was reflected in the Department of Agriculture’s assertion that cooperatives were becoming “a feature of African life as they provide training in committee work and general business affairs” (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1957, 64).

Another element of agrarian change in Bungoma district was middle-class peasant households’ spontaneous response to cash crop innovation. Despite demands from African households for inclusion in the cultivation of coffee since the 1930s,¹⁰ a conspicuous disinterest and antipathy characterized colonial state policy with regard to this issue.¹¹ It was not until 1949 that the colonial state, through the Department of Agriculture, appeared to relax its earlier hard-line stance on the cultivation of coffee by African households in such suitable areas as Bungoma. In February 1949, the Director of Agriculture informed a meeting of Senior Agricultural Officers in Nairobi of the decision to stimulate coffee growing by Africans in suitable areas that were not adjacent to European estates (Maxon 2002, 163). It was against this background that in May 1949, E. Cottington, a Senior Assistant Agricultural Officer from the coffee research station at Ruiru, paid a visit to North Nyanza district. He found that the prospects of developing vast areas to grow coffee in the Kimilili area of Bungoma district were excellent (Ibid.). Following Cottington’s visit, both officers of the Department of Agriculture and the local administrative officers of the colonial state moved swiftly to initiate the planting of Arabica coffee in the Kimilili and Elgon locations of Bungoma district in 1951. Initial planting involved 361 participating households, the majority of which planted approximately one-fifth of an acre (Ibid., 164).

The enthusiasm with which households in Bungoma district soon embraced the cultivation of coffee was evidenced by the establishment of and the commencement of operations by the first coffee factory in North Nyanza at Chwele in 1954 (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1954, 20). The factory was expected to handle some 15 tons of coffee during the 1954 season (Ibid.). Furthermore, a second factory at Chesikaki, also within Bungoma district, was almost complete by the end of 1954. The positive response by Bungoma households to the cultivation of coffee was well captured by the District Commissioner’s observation during 1954 that there appeared to be no obstacle to the rapid expansion of the coffee industry in the North of the district “where there is ample land and great enthusiasm for the crop” (North Nyanza Annual Report 1954, 18). The first season of the Chwele coffee factory’s operation proved to be most promising, producing 18 tons of clean coffee, 49% of which fell within the first three quality standards. In fact, coffee from this factory won the Coffee Cup award at the west Kenya agricultural show, held during 1955 (North Nyanza Annual Report 1955).

The popularity of growing Arabica coffee among Bungoma households during this phase of Kenya’s colonial economy is reflective not only of their propensity to embrace agricultural innovations, but also of the extent to which the forces of commercialization had penetrated their agrarian economy. It also testifies to the interconnectedness between policy appropriateness, peasant receptivity, and rural transformation. The table below, which compares particulars of African-grown coffee

between Bungoma households (inhabiting Elgon Nyanza) and the other parts of North Nyanza, corroborates this.

Table 2. African-Grown Arabic Coffee, 1958

District Acreage Production Value £ Growers Nurseries Factories Cooperatives (tons)

E. Nyanza	1,717	100	46,163	8,000	16	12	16
N. Nyanza	364	13	3,630	2,225	6	1	8

Source: Department of Agriculture, Annual Report 1958 (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1959, 14.)

This table shows that Elgon Nyanza had established a clear preponderance in all items pertaining to the coffee industry—accounting for over 82% of the acreage, 92% of the value in £, 92% of the coffee factories, and 66% of the cooperative societies. These statistics present an effective challenge to interpretations that associate peasant households with inertia and an inherent resistance to agrarian innovations.

The implications of the agrarian reform dimensions of the Swynnerton Plan for the rural population of Bungoma were complex. Whereas the relatively large acreages that characterize the district generally mitigated against the rise of landlessness, evidence abounds of the accentuation in rural socio-economic stratification. Middle-class peasant households that were most receptive to agrarian innovations and commercialization rose higher in the cycle of rural accumulation. As early as 1954, the Nyanza Provincial Commissioner acknowledged, “It is difficult to differentiate these days between what are called food crops and those which are termed cash crops” (Nyanza Province Annual Report 1954, 13).¹² In the 1940s, the possession of the ox-plough¹³ had been a key variable empowering some households in Bungoma to realize greater surpluses, which permitted them to occupy higher positions within the hierarchy of the colonial economy. In this category were men like Philipo Mwangale, who since the mid 1930s had played an instrumental role in organizing ploughing syndicates¹⁴ and also in articulating demands for higher maize prices through organizations such as the Kimilili Farmers Association (North Kavirondo Monthly Report, March 1938). In addition, chiefs such as Amtallah of Kimilili rose to higher levels in the colonial accumulation cycle because they owned ploughs.¹⁵ Other examples of rural middle-class households that captured the opportunities offered by the Swynnerton Plan include Pascal Nabwana,¹⁶ a colonial civil servant, and George Henry Kerre, the son of a colonial chief, Sudi. Since the mid-1930s, these households had taken advantage of colonial state efforts to stimulate rural commercialization through the extension of the market, and the inauguration of the Swynnerton Plan further widened the scope of their engagement with the colonial economy. Significantly, moreover, they served as centers of diffusion for agricultural innovations to those whose acreages were comparatively smaller. Consequently, they helped to account for the widespread manner in which the innovations advocated by the Swynnerton Plan were embraced in Bungoma district. It is also instructive that these

innovations have been sustainable over time. From 1989 to 1993, the district boasted 89,392 consolidated land units with 57,955 registered land title deeds (Bungoma District Development Plan 1989-1993, 6). And while registered cooperatives in the district numbered 124 by 1988 (Ibid., 88), this figure had jumped to 138 by 1996 (Bungoma District Development Plan 1994-96, 78). Moreover, Bungoma produced 1,800 tons of cleaned coffee and boasted 23 coffee processing units by 1996 (Ibid., 44).

Conclusion

In this article, I have used the case study of Bungoma district in western Kenya to demonstrate that African rural households possess the capacity to respond positively and spontaneously to agricultural innovations. These innovations traced their background to the Swynnerton Plan of 1954. I have shown that households in Bungoma district were quite receptive to the program of land consolidation and enclosure—both key recommendations of the Swynnerton Plan. This in turn paved the way for the adoption of other technical changes such as farm planning and the diversification of the agrarian economy of Bungoma district through the aggressive cultivation of a high-value cash crop—coffee. The case of Bungoma district thus demonstrates the complexity of the interaction between rural cultivators and state-sponsored initiatives. It shows that adequately sensitized peasant communities are amenable to transformation by beneficial and appropriately executed governmental programs. The weight of the argument, moreover, stands up against blanket indictments of the top-down approach to rural development (Scott 1998, 50). Instead, it is clear that the success of this approach hinges on the extent to which the formulation and execution of state policies is congenial to the economic interests of peasant households. Given these prerequisites, the case of Bungoma district shows that peasant households can be effective instruments of rural transformation in Africa.

Endnotes

¹The name Bungoma district was adopted after 1963 to designate this area. Prior to this date, the area fell within the wider administrative units variously referred to as North Kavirondo, North Nyanza, and Elgon Nyanza. Thus, in this article, these names are used interchangeably.

²Notable exceptions to this trend include R. M. Maxon, 2003 and S. Orvis, 1997.

³Colonial state self-interest in Kenya's rural agrarian economy was accentuated by its response to the Mau Mau rebellion (1952-57), which influenced the agrarian reform programs discussed in this article. For an elaboration see B. Berman 1990, 370-71.

⁴The grant of £ 5,000,000 by Her Majesty's Government to intensify the development of African agriculture constituted a major highlight in the Department of Agriculture's 1953 annual report. See Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1953, 1.

⁵Towards the end of 1938, for example, the North Kavirondo district Local Native Councils passed the "use of land resolution" which made it possible to enforce the protection of land. See North Kavirondo Annual Report (NKAR) 1938, Kenya National Archives (KNA: DC/NN/1/20).

⁶As late as 1960, Nyanza Provincial Commissioner F. A. Loyd made the observation in reference to land consolidation and farm layouts that in Elgon Nyanza, the problem was not one of consolidation but of effecting the accurate determination and demarcation of existing land rights, and planning and executing as efficient a road system as topography and public opinion would allow, as in fact there was virtually no fragmentation of holdings in this comparatively sparsely populated district. See Nyanza Province Annual Report (NPAR) 1960, KNA: PC/NZA/1/56.

⁷In 1956, what was formerly North Nyanza district was split into two districts, namely North Nyanza and Elgon Nyanza. The area of focus of this article fell within Elgon Nyanza district from this date on. See North Nyanza Annual Report 1956, KNA:DC/NN/1/37.

⁸Eric Clayton argues that the result of enclosure was an all-round improvement in husbandry standards including improved pasture management, increased use of crop rotations, and growing a wider variety of crops. See E. S. Clayton 1964, 30-31.

⁹While Nyanza Province as a whole had only 3,443 cattle sheds in 1957, these had more than doubled to 8,875 in 1958, with Elgon Nyanza alone accounting for 4,000 out of this total increase. See NPAR 1958, KNA: PC/NZA/1/54.

¹⁰Members of the North Kavirondo Local Native Council met the Imperial Commissioner, Lord Moyne, in March 1932 and expressed a desire to be allowed to cultivate coffee. See R. M. Maxon 2002, 156.

¹¹Throughout 1932, M. H. Grieve, who strongly believed in regulating the cultivation of high-value cash crops by license, was the Agricultural Officer in North Kavirondo district. Rather than encourage coffee cultivation, he placed greater emphasis on growing more root crops to check famine. See NKAR 1932, KNA: DC/NN/1/13.

¹²Kenya's rural areas experienced greater colonial-state-directed agricultural commercialization due to the repercussions of the Great Depression in the early 1930s and the exigencies of the Second World War in the 1940s. Nascent processes of rural socio-economic stratification took root during this time.

¹³Archival sources are awash with evidence of a more pronounced adoption and use of the plough by households within Bungoma in the 1940s. In 1943, for example, Kimilili location had 62 double-disc ploughs and 1,916 single-disc ploughs. See North Kavirondo Annual Agricultural Report (NKAAGR) 1943, KNA: AK/2/27.

¹⁴As early as 1934 Nyanza province Agricultural Officer W. L. Watt observed that the Kimilili area had the boldest form of farming in the province. "They have syndicates, and these employ labourers, use three furrow and other ploughs, transport with carts and wagons, build large grain stores and in every way behave themselves like farmers." See North Kavirondo Annual Agricultural Report (NKAAGR) 1934, KNA: AK/2/19.

¹⁵While on a tour of Kimilili location on 4 June 1943, for example, the North Kavirondo district Agricultural Officer found that chief Amtallah had three ploughing teams that were involved in breaking land for cultivation. See AO North Kavirondo, Safari Diary, 4 June 1943, KNA: AK/21/24.

¹⁶A convert of the catholic mission, Pascal Nabwana later trained as a teacher at the Jeans school at Kabete. In 1943, he served as a leveler with the soil conservation service at Kitale and later tried to improve rural water supplies through the construction of dams in

locations within Bungoma. He also represented Kimilili location in the North Kavirondo Local Native Council (LNC) where he articulated the rights of Africans to be permitted to cultivate coffee. See De Wolff 1971, 179. See also Minutes of North Kavirondo LNC, 30 June 1939, KNA: PC/NZA/2/1/36.

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