Environmental Adaptations and the Challenges on a Diaspora Group: Abanyole Emigrants in Lugari, Western Kenya

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Abstract This paper is based on a comparative study between Abanyole of Western Kenya who dwell in the indigenous setting of Luanda Division of Emuhaya District, and those, who due to a number of factors, emigrated to a settlement scheme in Lugari Division of Lugari District. In the study, fieldwork, which involved a triangulated data collecting strategy, was carried out. The methods used in data collection included participant observation, key informant interviews, focused group discussions and questionnaires. This article discusses the political, social, and economic dynamics behind the emigration of Abanyole to the settlement schemes, Lugari in particular. It also examines the metamorphosis of the settlement scheme lands; from the initial expansive nature, to the current fragmented forms. In the final analysis, the paper looks at the emigrants' physical as well as the cultural adaptations to the new environment, and the latter's influences on the subsistence and socio-cultural lives of the said group. The study found out that the new social environment in Lugari – characteristically, a cultural melting pot – has greatly impinged on the core values, ethos and vernacular of the Abanyole emigrants.

Keywords Adaptation, Environment, Culture, Migration, Language

people's culture, but it too has a creative, causative force to necessitate some distinctive mode of life among humans. Harris and Hawley's ideas, as stated above, reminiscence Julian Steward's (1955) concept of 'cultural ecology'. Steward says that human beings enter the ecological scene and introduce the super-organic factor of culture. 'Cultural ecology', he says, is the study of the adjustment or relationship of culture to the natural environment. While the above authors see the essential determinants of cultural institutions as the physical environment, Wissler (1923) refers to the dominant food source as greatly influencing culture area formations. This gives the effects of food production a mediating role between habitat and culture.

This paper discusses the physical as well as social environmental adaptations experienced by the Abanyole of Western Kenya, who had emigrated from their indigenous habitation in Bunyore to settle in Lugari Settlement Scheme. The paper is based on a larger study, of a comparative nature, that targeted the Abanyole population in the indigenous locale of Bunyore, and the Diaspora group settled in Lugari. The paper examines the factors, players and interplays behind relocation to Lugari; the dialectics in population and land politics that threaten food security in the new settlement; and the socio-cultural dynamics in the new environment that pose challenges on the *omunyole* (a typical individual of Bunyore origins) identity.

1. Introduction

Studies on environmentalism tend to agree that human social and cultural behaviour is to a large extent determined, in a mechanistic fashion, by natural habitat. American anthropologists Otis Mason and the German Zoologist and Geographer Friedrich Ratzel for instance consider natural habitat as delineating social and behavioural particularities, which in their totality, may be said to constitute a cultural area (Harris 1968). Hawley (1950) argues that not only does the environment exert a permissive and limiting effect on a

2. Population, Study Area and Methodology

2.1. The Abanyole

The Abanyole constitute one of the sub-groups of the larger Abaluyia ethnic group in Kenya, which occupies most of what is administratively the Western Province of Kenya. Abanyole, in particular, are inhabitants of an area locally referred to as *Ebunyole*; an area that is within the administrative district of Emuhaya. The district is

surrounded by *Abashisa*, *Abalokoli*, and *Abetakho* - all sub-groups of Abaluyia, and to a greater degree, the Nilotic Luo (*Abanyolo*) tribe. Although the relationship between Abanyole and their fellow Abaluyia neighbours is generally amicable, owing to long historical misunderstandings over boundaries particularly in areas around Maseno, their association with the Luo has, largely, been frosty.

There is no consensus yet by researchers and scholars on the actual origins of Abanyole. However, it is generally agreed that, from wherever they had originated (probably in *Misri*, Egypt), the fore parents of Abanyole exited at the shores of Lake Victoria. They then travelled to Kit Mikayi near Kisumu, before sojourning at a place called Esianganyinya in the present Wekhomo Location. It is from Esianganyinya that Abanyole spread out to other parts of the current *Ebunyole* region. Gideon Were (1967), on the other hand, suggests that the ancestors of Abanyole may have hived out of the Banyole (Bunyuli) of Eastern Uganda. They then travelled through Kadimo, to Sakwa and to Akala in Nyanza Province, before settling in *Ebunyole*.

The genealogy of Abanyole is traced to one, Anyole son of Mwenje. Anyole is said to have had several sons, among them being Amutete, Asiratsi, Amang'ali, Andongoyi (Tongoyi), Asiekwe, Asakami, Amuli, Mwiranyi, Ambayi, Asikhale, Amuhaya and Muhando. These sons had different mothers. Nowadays, the term *Anyole* is often invoked in a camaraderie manner by Abanyole in reference to "one of our own"; a kinsperson.

One of the main characteristics of the Abanyole community is their salient clan differentiations; with the clans named after the sons of *Anyole*. Not only has this influenced the politics of the day in Bunyore, but it too has led to chauvinistic feelings and disparaging attitudes among member clans. Gideon Were (op. cit.) makes reference to twelve clans that are found among Abanyole. Among the prominent clans here are the *Abasiekwe*, *Ababayi*, *Abakhaya*, *Abasikhale*, *Abasiratsi*, *Abamuuli*, *Abamutete*, *Abamang'ali*, *Abatongoi*, *Abasakami* and *Abamutsa*. *Aba-* in this context refers to "those belonging to-". The clans are, in this case, traced to the sons of Anyole.

2.2. The Study Area

Lugari District, where the study was undertaken, is a far flung district from Emuhaya (about 100 Kms apart), and is situated in the extreme eastern part of Western Province. The district comprises settlement schemes that were acquired under the Million-Acre Scheme - a deliberate program mounted by the first post-colonial administration for purposes of settling the African population on former European lands. For that purpose, eleven settlement schemes were demarcated in the area now covering Lugari District.ii

According to some informants in the study, the name Lugari is derived from *lukari*, a word from the Tachoni sub-group of the Abaluyia. In *kitachoni* (language of the Tachoni), *lukari* means "an area enclosed by a mass of water". The latter is in reference to River Chekalini which,

when flooded, would in those days make this area inaccessible to Tachoni hunters.

Lugari district was carved out of the larger Kakamega District in 1998. It borders Kakamega and Nandi to the South, Bungoma to the West, Uasin Gishu to the East and Trans-Nzoia to the North. It occupies an area of 670.2 kilometre squared. According to the 1999 Population and Housing Census, Lugari had a population of 234,536 people and a density of 350 persons per square kilometre (GOK 2001). The district is divided into three administrative divisions, viz. Likuyani, Lugari and Matete. Matete Division has the highest population density followed by Likuyani and Lugari Divisions in that order. As regards population size, Likuyani Division accounts for the largest share (42.2%) of the population, followed by Lugari Division (37.1%) and Matete Division (20.6%). The poverty level of Lugari is 57.37%, with Matete accounting for the highest incidences of poverty (GOK 1996). The poor are mainly squatters, landless and households headed by children and women.

3. Method

Using purposive sampling procedure, Lugari Division was identified as the ideal study site, due to the relatively high density of the Abanyole population in the area compared to other parts of the district. Within Lugari Division, there was a conscious and deliberate move to pick Lugari location as the ultimate study area, this too based on the significantly high clusters of the Abanyole settled in this place. The population of Lugari Division exhibits a community of people with diverse cultural background. The majority of settlers come from the various Abaluyia sub-groups, although *Abatachoni*, *Abanyole*, *Abalokoli* and *Babukusu* form the most dominant lot. Pockets of other tribes are also settled here, mainly but not limited to the Kalenjin, Kikuyu, Kisii and Luo. The rich cultural diversity encapsulated within this environment has resulted into the region being a good exemplification of a cultural melting pot. These communities have coexisted harmoniously, save for isolated incidences of ethnic tensions that essentially emanate from the political arena, the litmus test being the 2007 post-elections violence.

Being a heterogeneous community, Abanyole households and informants in Lugari were identified through the use of purposive as well as the snowball sampling procedures. Data was collected through key informant interviews, focused group discussions, informal interviews, the observation method, and a survey method targeting 100 households. Both qualitative and quantitative information were elicited from the enlisted methods of data collection.

The study was driven by three theoretical perspectives. First, was the *Historicism* associated with the German-Jew, Frans Boas. In the light of Historicism, the study looked at the sui generis or subjective spheres of culture whose "limiting factor", according to Boas, were an environment's physical features. The environment, he says, has the capacity to extract the kind of cultural development which may take

place within a particular milieu (Boas 1911).

The second theoretical model, and which is closely related to the above, was the Environmentalism linked to Roy Ellen (1982). Ellen says that environmentalism is applied to an explanatory scheme, which maintains that human social and cultural behaviour is to a large extent determined, in a mechanistic fashion, by the natural habitat. The 'cultural area' concept of Otis Mason and Friedrich Ratzel (in Harris 1968), suggesting that man's habitat is presumed to delineate certain social and behavioural particularities, is also linked to Environmentalism.

Finally, William Thomas' (1969) Definition of the Situation was instrumental in guiding the study on areas to do with choice and decision-making, particularly in reference to the Abanyole emigrants who left *Ebunyole* to Lugari. This theory has its basis in the motivation behind an individual's behaviour and behaviour change.

4. Findings and Discussions

This section, which is largely descriptive and derived from the qualitative data method, discusses the findings of the study. In a chronological pattern, the section commences with discussions on the formation of Lugari as a settlement area in the post-colonial era, the dynamics behind the emigration of the Abanyole in this new locale, the socio-cultural challenges of the Diaspora group in the new environment, and the making of an emergent socio-cultural identity that was largely shaped by the new ecosystem.

4.1. The Road to Lugari: The Creation of a Settlement Scheme

Findings in the study indicate that, in the early 1960's, parts of the land now covering Lugari District had been demarcated into settlement plots, being a component of Kenya's Million Acre Scheme. In 1963 and through funds from West Germany and England, Chekalini, Lumakanda and Mautuma settlement schemes had been carved out and were ready for occupation. Between the years 1965 to 1967, and with disbursements from the World Bank/International Development Bank, Sergoit, Soy, Sango, Springfield (now Kongoni), Nzoia and Mabusi Schemes were also surveyed, sub-divided and incorporated into the scheme. The size of acreage in the various schemes varied on the basis of availability of funds for survey purposes, and the agricultural viability of the area, taking cognizance of factors such as the presence of rocky patches and wetlands. For instance, Chekalini, Lugari, Lumakanda, Sango and Mautuma schemes were sub-divided into portions of between 12 and 17 acre plots, while Soy and Sergoit schemes plots measured 38 acres or above. However, for those who would afford, Special Plots measuring 100 acres, each complete with developments left behind by European settlers, were set aside for purchase. In total, there are now 11 settlement schemes in the entire Lugari district.

In principle, this would be an attractive option to the people of Western Kenya who were beginning to feel the pressures of land scarcity and population density. After all, nothing much was required from the new settlers for them to acquire a settlement plot. In fact, incentives were galore. In order to kick-start their new life, settlers were to be cushioned with a number of provisions that included hybrid cows; farming implements such as rolls of barbed wire, hoes, mattocks and wheelbarrows; housing materials like nails, doors, iron sheets, posts and wooden doors; and agricultural inputs like fertilizers, maize seed - the benefits of being ploughed for aside. For all these, the new settlers were to be given two types of soft loans: a Land Loan meant for the purchase of the plot, and a Development Loan meant for the physical developments thereon. The loans, which ranged from as low as fifteen hundred Kenya shillings (about fifteen US dollars) for both types of loans, would be payable over a period of thirty years.

4.2. The Road to Lugari: Pressures, Dilemmas, and a New Ecosystem

Through political and administrative leadership, Abanyole came to learn of this window of opportunity. They only needed an endorsement from the local administrators or the political class to be considered for the plots in the settlement schemes. The political class from Western province initiated a deliberate sensitization process to educate the indigenous community on the advantages of relocating. For instance, around 1962 a huge *baraza* (public meeting) hosted by the then District Officer was held in Emuhaya. The main agenda was the relocation of Abanyole to the schemes to give way for the creation of a National Park around Maseno and Emutete areas. The political heavyweights from Luhyialand who then included the late Eric Khasakhala, the late Masinde Muliro, James Otiende and Burudi Nabwera addressed the gathering. Individuals willing to leave were to be compensated to the tune of one hundred and twenty seven Kenya shillings (less than one and a half US dollars), before being relocated to Lugari. Few hearkened to the politicians' pleas but most stayed put. Other parallel efforts were also initiated to convince the Abanyole to buy land in the schemes (without necessarily relocating) on the grounds of scarcity back home.

To most Abanyole therefore, the quest for relocating to Lugari was akin to being caught between a rock and a hard place. While the heat of land and population pressures was becoming increasingly difficult to withstand back in *Ebunyole*, the promised land of Lugari on the other hand was devoid of the guarantees of security and warmth embedded in the social group. The new life in the schemes was bound to be lonely, uncertain and alienating. It is within such contexts that William Thomas (1969) talks of the need to redefine one's situation. This, according to Thomas, is the time to pause, examine and deliberate on the past experiences with the aim of charting a way forward. For the eventual emigrants, the past must have been painful and there was

need to change the situation. Lugari may prove an option for a more fulfilling life. For those reluctant to relocate, a 'solitary' life was meant to be for those members of society that had been banished for having committed atrocities or infringed on the social norms. In the end, and when the first emigrants finally settled, a dichotomy that pitted two sets of Abanyole was gradually put in motion: *Abanyole abo musikimu* (the Abanyole settled in the schemes) and *Abanyole abo murisafu* (the Abanyole in the 'reserves' or the indigenous habitat). While the former were seen to be more enterprising and exposed, the latter were thought to be less innovative and much more conservative.

The approval of a settlement plot to a person was done on the strength of the individual's willingness to repay the loans advanced, that is, the Land Loan and the Development Loan. To a number of settlers, and particularly having not had a previous exposure to related circumstances, this seemed a remote concept. Moreover, the rules on repayment were lax and the follow-up was not quite concerted. The loanees started defaulting.

The 1980's witnessed a renewed vigour by loaning institutions, such as the Agricultural Finance Corporation (A.F.C), to redeem the loans advanced to the plot owners. With a now run-away interest, the settlers were in a fix as most of them were overwhelmed by the new demands and could not raise the cash required. A title deed, the only document which would have assisted them redress the situation through sale of land, was still in the hands of the government's Ministry of Lands and Settlement; at least not till the loan is fully paid. The settlers petitioned for a reprieve - to be allowed to, at least, sell part of their land in order to pay off the loans. The government granted the request, but on condition that such disposal be solely for servicing the loan and that the amount of land sold or left behind, be agriculturally viable – preferably above an acre. Little did the government realize that it had set in motion a process of haphazard land transactions that it could not regulate. Thus, apart from land inheritance, this explains why land size in Lugari is increasingly dwindling. To date, a number of the original settlers are now landless, having disposed off the entire land and thereby rendering their families to untold sufferings.

The study sought to know how the Abanyole respondents here acquired the land on which they had settled or farmed. Table 1 summarizes the responses.

Table 1. How respondents in Lugari acquired land where they had settled/farmed

Means of land acquisition	Frequency	Percent
Bought from other by self	21	21.0
Bought by parents from other	5	5.0
Bought as scheme	14	14.0
Inherited from parents	59	59.0
Lease land	1	1.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1 indicates that 14% of the respondents in Lugari were the original scheme settlers. This is essentially the

remnant of the exodus team that left Bunyore to settle in Lugari in the early 1960's, thanks to the facilitation by the establishment. These were part of the settlers that occupied Chekalini Scheme, each of them gaining plots measuring an average of 12 acres. They joined other occupants who included former workers and squatters on European settlements and other emigrants – all with diverse cultural background. Hence, a new socio-cultural environment was now in the making in Lugari.

The largest percent of landowners as per Table 1 acquired their parcels through the traditional tenure system of inheritance (59%). This lot essentially comprises sons of original Abanyole settlers who had emigrated from Bunyore to purchase settlement plots. That a substantial percent of the land-owning group in Lugari acquired this resource by way of inheritance is an ominous warning: that Lugari is going the Emuhaya way in *Ebunyole*, where the intertwining factors of land scarcity and population density resulted to small landholdings that are not viable for optimal food production. The accelerated rate of land fragmentation in Lugari is exemplified by the sizes of land owned by the respondents. In the study, the mean size of land owned by the respondents in the household survey method was 3.4 acres, an indication that it had receded about three times from the initial 12 acres that were issued as scheme plots.

4.3. Lugari: The Dynamics of Land and Food Situation, and the Cutting of a New Cultural Niche

A poor food security situation was the imminent result of the intertwined factors of population density and small landholdings in *Ebunyole*. Here, the occurrence of hunger should be seen largely as an abstraction between human populations and the environment. Indeed, hunger was the decisive factor behind the relocation of Abanyole to the settlement schemes. Franz Boas (1911) refers to factors such as population density and scarcity of land as 'limiting factors' in the development of a culture, since they define a particular niche.

Looked at uncritically, Abanyole who had migrated to Lugari seemed to be advantaged in terms of land and agricultural variables that are considered crucial for positive crop output. But with time, the sustainability of these critical determinants was put to test. Contrary to popular contention and using the Abanyole example, it is now debatable to continue classifying the settlement schemes, and Lugari in particular, as among the Kenya's breadbaskets. True, in the incipient stages of the settlement schemes, Lugari was a land of abundance. Then, land demarcations were not allowed and furthermore, agricultural policies and practices by the Kenyan government were farmer-friendly and thus ensured high surplus output. These factors were critical in boosting the per capita output of maize yield in the region. With the government sanctioning land sub-divisions and disposal in the 1980's, things took a turn to the worse in the maize production sector. The smaller the parcels of land, the less economically viable the pieces were. Sequentially, the

previously commercial outlook in maize farming began receding gradually into a largely subsistence production.

In the study, the mean size of land under the maize crop by the 100 households sampled in the survey method was 1.9 acres. Table 2 shows the average maize output per year by the households under study. It is evident that most households (53%) have an average yield of between 5 – 15 bags of maize annually, clearly cautioning that there exists real threat in the production capacity to the extent that surplus is gradually becoming past tense.

Table 2. Annual maize yield of respondents in Lugari

Yield (in 90 kg bags)	Frequency	Percent
None	0	0.0
Less than 5 bags	14	14.0
5 – 10 bags	20	20.0
11 – 15 bags	33	33.0
16 – 20 bags	6	6.0
21 - 25 bags	6	6.0
26 – 30 bags	7	7.0
Over 30 bags	14	14.0
Total	100	100.0

What this tells us is that the physical environment of Lugari, defined by the increasingly contracting size of landholdings, is now becoming an important determinant in the declining food security situation here. Before this fragmentation process and at the peak of heightened maize production, Lugari would accurately be considered among the main maize resource areas in Kenya. Indeed then, there was a distinct socio-economic division between the Abanyole *abomusikimu* and Abanyole *Abomurisafu*. In the conception of the latter, the term 'scheme' or *musikimu* would and still, albeit deceptively, represent a region abundant in maize. The settlement schemes (apart from Kitale) were, and still are the suitable and popular zones in an entrenched reciprocal relation locally referred to as *okhusumaiii*. On the other hand, visits by Abanyole from the settlement schemes would not be complete or welcome if not accompanied by a baggage of maize. The Abanyole in the settlement schemes were, and still are dependent upon by those in Luanda for not only providing maize assistance, but also, giving other remittances necessary for economic and social livelihood.

As already stated here, the Abanyole emigrants to Lugari encountered individuals and groups with diverse socio-cultural background with whom they had to strike a chemistry of coexistence. This was yet another challenge on the Abanyole, though now from the socio-cultural front. In the context of the school of diffusionism, they could not evade acculturation pressures in their new milieu. Not only were they to interact with other sub-tribes of the Abaluyia, with the Maragoli and Babukusu making the bigger proportion, but also, they were to live symbiotically with individuals from unrelated cultural backgrounds – the Kalenjin and Kikuyu topping this list. Having come from an

area exhibiting cultural homogeneity, the new social environment was a major challenge on the tenacity of the emigrants in upholding traditionalism. In the end, it is the pluralism type of acculturation – where cultural identities are still maintained in spite of the social interaction – which seem to have adapted well to the new environment.

Challenges on the Abaluyia culture in general and the Abanyole one specifically can be exemplified when issues on interring the dead arose. Where were the dead to be buried? Were they to be taken back to Bunyore and be laid to rest near/next to their ancestors, or should this customary observation be ignored and the dead be buried in their newly found home? This ambivalence, and other issues of this nature, was to be addressed in a *baraza* of Luhya held in Lugari in 1969. According to informants, in this meeting, it was decided that individual families should be left at liberty to make decisions on the place they prefer to inter their dead. However, such issues only served to make it explicit that a social boundary was being entrenched between the Abanyole *abomurisafu* and those *abomusikimu*.

At the linguistic level, the adulteration of the *olunyole* language was one of the consequences of the new environment, thanks to the acculturation and socialization forces. Like any medium of communication, the *olunyole* language bound the Abanyole people together and was thus the insignia of the *Anyole* identity. In their new environment in Lugari, the social institutions and socialization agencies typical of the Abanyole culture would be subjected to interference. Being a cultural melting pot, not only will the relevance of the *olunyole* language be put to test, but also, inculcated in the basic attitude and values of growing children will be cultural traits with much more universalistic features. With a poor command of the *olunyole* language and a similarly poor grasp of the Abanyole ethos, a social chasm was building between Abanyole of the Settlement Schemes and those back home. The import of this statement was best exemplified when, in the observation method, the researcher interacted with the relatively youthful generation of Abanyole in the Lugari Diaspora. Not only was their knowledge of the peoples, heritage and culture of the Abanyole generally wanting, but also the articulation of *olunyole* was far from being fluent. The experience in Luanda however revealed a group that was better versed in tradition and culture, apart from possessing superior command of the *olunyole* vernacular. We therefore witness the curving out of a socio-cultural niche of the Abanyole in Lugari that is greatly influenced by their new environment, and which bears some distinct difference with that of the indigenous group back in Luanda. In a nutshell, as generations come and go, a pluralistic form of cultural adaptation seems to be giving way to a situation where distinct cultural identities among the communities settled in Lugari are gradually merging to the fusion form of adaptation - a sort of third culture. So, as American anthropologist, Otis Mason, and German zoologist and geographer, Friedrich Ratzel (in Harris 1968) would interpret, a new 'cultural area' in Lugari was in the making.

5. Conclusions

Guided by dominant eco-related theories and using a diachronic analytical approach, this study looks at the transformative processes and influences of a sub-population of the Abanyole of Western Kenya. In particular, the study focuses on how a new ecosystem and mode of resource exploitation in Lugari, affects the food security situation and the socio-cultural fabric of the Abanyole emigrants. The qualitative approach was greatly explored to concretise most of what appears here.

A lesson learnt from the study on the ambivalence of the Abanyole on whether or not they should relocate to Lugari, an area with better prospects than the indigenous locale, is the competition between security and warmth embedded in the collective or communal group, but which may be devoid of economic progress, and the quest for self-aggrandizement that is characterized by individualism. Indeed, the new environment in Lugari injected a fresh economic impetus among the settlers, a factor that contributed in the redefinition of the two sets of Abanyole; those in the indigenous setting of Bunyore aka “reserve” (*abomurisafu*) and those who had emigrated to the schemes (*abomusikimu*). However, this paper argues that the continuous fragmentation of land and a swelling human population are factors that seem to be playing against the sort of affluence (particularly that of food) that is associated with the Diaspora in Lugari. In terms of socio-cultural adaptations, the new environment in the schemes is seen to be a threat on the identity of the *Anyole*. Having encountered people from diverse cultural background and possibly intermarried, the porosity of the culture of Abanyole was exposed with each passing generation. With these effects being felt in core areas of culture; norms and values, customs and beliefs, and the *olunyole* language, a pluralistic sort of cultural adaptation

with features of heterogeneity emerged. This paper argues that this form of adaptation is gradually giving way to a third culture – the fusion form.

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Notes

- i Adams Kutahi: Personal communication
- ii At the time of writing, Lugari had been further sub-divided into two more districts, viz. Likuyani District and Lugari District.
- iii Conventionally, *okhusuma* was considered a form of social support and exchange mechanism, whereupon members of the Abanyole community who experienced irredeemable food constraints would offer labor in anticipation of being given cereals or other foods in appreciation.