



A Historical Study of the Soapstone Industry among the Indigenous Tabaka Community in Kisii County, Kenya, 1900–1980

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ABSTRACT

The soapstone industry has long been an important economic and cultural activity among the indigenous Tabaka community in Kisii County, Kenya. Despite its historical significance, limited scholarly attention has been given to its development and transformation over time. This study examined the history of the soapstone industry among the indigenous Tabaka community between 1900 and 1980. The objectives were to trace the origins and historical development of the industry and to examine the historical factors that influenced its growth and transformation during the colonial and early post-independence periods. The study was guided by the Sustainable Livelihood Theory (SLT), which provided a framework for understanding how access to natural resources and local knowledge sustained community livelihoods over time. A qualitative case study design was adopted, utilizing oral interviews, focus group discussions, and archival document analysis. Purposive sampling was used to select 20 respondents comprising soapstone artisans, community elders, local leaders, and government officials with knowledge of the industry's history. Data were analyzed thematically through historical interpretation. The findings reveal that soapstone mining and carving existed long before colonial rule as an indigenous economic and cultural practice based on inherited skills and local knowledge. During the colonial period, government policies introduced taxation, commercialization, and external markets, resulting in significant changes in production, organization, and trade. Following Kenya's independence, the industry expanded through the establishment of artisan cooperatives and increased market access, reinforcing its importance as a source of livelihood and cultural identity. However, its historical development was constrained by inadequate institutional support, exploitation by middlemen, environmental degradation, and limited access to improved mining and carving technologies. The study concludes that the soapstone industry was a central feature of the historical development of the Tabaka community between 1900 and 1980, shaping its economic organization and preserving its indigenous cultural heritage. It recommends strengthening historical preservation initiatives, supporting community-based cooperatives, promoting sustainable resource management, and integrating the history of the Tabaka soapstone industry into Kenya's cultural heritage and development policies.

Keywords: Soapstone industry, Tabaka, indigenous community, Kisii County, historical study, artisanal mining, Kenya, 1900–1980.

INTRODUCTION

Mining has, for centuries, played a fundamental role in shaping global civilizations. From the Iron Age to the present era of industrial advancement, the extraction and utilization of mineral resources have contributed substantially to economic development, technological progress, and social transformation. Globally, mineral exports account for a significant portion of national revenues in many resource-endowed countries. According



to the World Bank (2020), mining contributes over 20% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in more than 70 countries, underlining its centrality to development. Beyond its economic importance, mining has historically facilitated trade, technological innovation, urbanization, and the emergence of specialized industries. However, this prominence has also been associated with environmental degradation, socio-economic inequality, and the marginalization of indigenous communities where mining activities have been poorly regulated (World Bank, 2020; Hilson, 2016).

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) remains an important component of the global mining sector. The International Labor Organization (ILO, 2019) estimates that more than 40 million people worldwide depend directly or indirectly on ASM for their livelihoods. In many developing countries, artisanal mining provides employment, preserves indigenous knowledge, and supports rural economies where alternative sources of income are limited. Despite these contributions, artisanal mining is frequently characterized by informality, inadequate technology, weak institutional support, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to markets, thereby constraining its contribution to sustainable development (ILO, 2019; Hilson & McQuilken, 2014).

Mining has a long history in Africa, predating colonial occupation by many centuries. Indigenous communities extracted minerals such as iron, gold, copper, and salt using locally developed technologies for domestic consumption and regional trade. These mining activities were closely linked to cultural traditions, economic exchange, and political organization. During the colonial period, however, European administrations transformed mining through policies designed to maximize revenue and supply raw materials to metropolitan industries. Colonial governments introduced taxation, licensing systems, and land regulations that weakened indigenous control over mineral resources and disrupted traditional production systems. These historical processes contributed to inequalities that persisted after independence (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Rodney, 1972).

Africa remains one of the world's most mineral-rich continents. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2021), mining contributes nearly 10% of Africa's Gross Domestic Product and over 50% of its export earnings. Nevertheless, many African countries continue to experience the "resource curse," whereby abundant mineral wealth has not translated into broad-based socio-economic development. In response, continental initiatives such as the Africa Mining Vision (AMV) and programmes implemented by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) advocate for inclusive, transparent, and sustainable mining that benefits local communities through value addition, improved governance, and formalization of artisanal mining (AfDB, 2021; African Union, 2009; ECA, 2018).

Kenya possesses a variety of mineral resources, including soda ash, fluorspar, gemstones, titanium, limestone, and soapstone. Although mining contributes less than one percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product, the sector remains an important source of livelihood in many rural areas. The Mining Act (2016) and Kenya Vision 2030 identify mining as a strategic sector capable of promoting economic growth, employment creation, and rural development. According to Mutembei (2020), artisanal mining directly supports more than 500,000 Kenyans, while many others benefit indirectly through trade, transport, and related economic activities (Government of Kenya, 2016; Government of Kenya, 2007; Mutembei, 2020).

Among Kenya's artisanal mining centers, Tabaka in Kisii County is internationally recognized for its rich soapstone deposits and long-established carving tradition. Soapstone, a soft metamorphic rock composed primarily of talc, has been utilized by the indigenous Abagusii community for generations to produce household utensils, ceremonial objects, ornaments, and sculptures. Historical evidence suggests that soapstone extraction and carving existed long before colonial rule and formed part of indigenous knowledge systems transmitted through family apprenticeship and community practice. These activities served both economic and cultural functions within the Tabaka community (Ochieng', 1974; Akama, 2002; Were & Wilson, 1984).

Between 1900 and 1980, the soapstone industry underwent significant transformation. During the colonial period, British administrators recognized the commercial value of Tabaka soapstone and encouraged its production for external markets through taxation, commercialization, and improved transport infrastructure. These changes gradually transformed soapstone carving from a household-based activity into a commercial



enterprise. Following Kenya's independence in 1963, artisans expanded production, established cooperative societies, and accessed national and international markets, strengthening the industry's economic importance while preserving the cultural identity of the indigenous Tabaka community (Maxon, 1992; Ochieng', 1974; Government of Kenya, 1965).

Despite its historical significance, the soapstone industry in Tabaka between 1900 and 1980 has received limited scholarly attention. Existing studies have focused largely on the artistic value of soapstone carvings, tourism, and contemporary economic contributions, with minimal emphasis on the historical evolution of the industry. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of how indigenous institutions, colonial administration, commercialization, and post-independence policies shaped the industry's development. This study therefore examines the historical development of the soapstone industry among the indigenous Tabaka community in Kisii County between 1900 and 1980, thereby contributing to Kenyan historiography and enhancing understanding of the relationship between indigenous industries, community livelihoods, and cultural heritage (Akama, 2002; Mutembei, 2020; Ochieng', 1974).

Statement of the Problem

The soapstone industry has been an important indigenous economic activity among the Tabaka community in Kisii County for generations. Between 1900 and 1980, the industry experienced significant changes brought about by colonial administration, commercialization, and the political and economic developments that followed Kenya's independence. Although the industry played a vital role in sustaining livelihoods, preserving indigenous knowledge, and shaping the cultural identity of the Tabaka community, its historical development during this period has not been adequately documented. Most existing studies have concentrated on the artistic, tourism, and economic aspects of soapstone carving, with limited attention given to its historical evolution and the factors that influenced its growth. Consequently, there is inadequate historical knowledge of how the soapstone industry developed, adapted to changing political and economic circumstances, and contributed to the social, economic, and cultural history of the indigenous Tabaka community. This study seeks to fill this gap by reconstructing the historical development of the soapstone industry in Tabaka between 1900 and 1980 and documenting its significance in the community's history.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) is widely recognised as a critical component of rural economies across the globe. In an extensive multi-country study, Hilson and McQuilken (2014) estimated that ASM supports the livelihoods of over one hundred million people directly and indirectly through mineral extraction, processing, and trade. Hentschel et al. (2003), examining ASM in Bolivia, found that artisanal gold miners significantly contributed to household incomes, although this was often compromised by severe environmental degradation, unsafe working conditions, and long-term health issues. In India, Singh and Upadhyay (2015) concluded that ASM activities in tribal regions had a considerable impact on poverty reduction, but also raised concerns about cultural erosion and displacement of indigenous practices. Labonne and Gilman (2009) observed that ASM could only deliver sustainable outcomes if properly integrated into national development frameworks with clear community participation and governance structures.

In Africa, ASM contributes significantly to national and household economies. According to the African Minerals Development Centre (AMDC, 2017), ASM accounts for over twenty percent of mineral output in countries such as Ghana and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Ghana, Banchirigah (2006) found that ASM generated rural employment and contributed to poverty alleviation. However, the sector operated largely outside formal legal structures, creating tensions around land use, environmental degradation, and loss of government revenue. In Zimbabwe, Mabhena (2012) noted that ASM was instrumental in supporting rural livelihoods among marginalised populations, especially unemployed youth. Despite these benefits, the absence of social protection mechanisms and regulatory oversight exposed miners to exploitation and dangerous working conditions.

In Kenya, the ASM sector remains under-researched. The Ministry of Mining (2016) estimated that over five



hundred thousand people are directly engaged in ASM, with many more deriving indirect benefits. Mutembei (2020) confirmed that ASM in Western Kenya, particularly in Migori and Kakamega, provides employment and addresses youth unemployment. However, challenges such as lack of financing, inadequate equipment, and regulatory exclusion persist. Onyambu (2013) and Ogembo (2015) explored the economic significance of soapstone production in Tabaka, observing that the sector supports livelihoods and contributes to tourism. Nevertheless, both studies lacked an historical lens and did not examine how colonial legacies and market shifts shaped the industry over time. In Tabaka specifically, Nyanchoka (2016) reported that soapstone mining was the principal economic activity for over sixty percent of households.

The industry supported diverse roles, including extraction, carving, transportation, and marketing. Informal family-based labour arrangements were common, with women playing a central role in polishing, packaging, and trade, despite lacking formal recognition. Local micro-enterprises such as cooperatives and small-scale exporters emerged, offering employment and enhancing social cohesion (Ogembo, 2015). However, artisans faced challenges including fluctuating prices, exploitative intermediaries, and limited access to external markets. Environmental and health issues have also been highlighted. Nyamwaro et al. (2017) noted that extensive quarrying led to environmental degradation, including soil erosion and dust-related respiratory illnesses. Agricultural productivity declined as quarrying expanded into arable land. Despite these challenges, the Kisii Soapstone Cooperative Society emerged as a key institution promoting artisan welfare, skill development, and advocacy for improved working conditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Sustainable Livelihood Theory. The Sustainable Livelihood Theory (SLT), developed by Chambers and Conway (1991), provides a framework for understanding how communities use available resources to sustain their livelihoods and cope with challenges. The theory emphasizes five livelihood assets: natural, physical, financial, human, and social capital. In this study, SLT is applied to examine how the soapstone industry supported the livelihoods of the indigenous Tabaka community between 1900 and 1980. Natural capital refers to soapstone resources, while physical capital includes mining tools and production facilities. Human capital focuses on indigenous skills and knowledge passed through generations, whereas financial and social capital highlight income generation, cooperation, and community networks. The theory is useful in explaining the relationship between soapstone production, cultural preservation, and community resilience. It also helps assess how historical changes influenced the sustainability and development of the soapstone industry in Tabaka.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study research design to examine the historical development of the soapstone industry among the indigenous Tabaka community in Kisii County between 1900 and 1980. The study utilized both primary and secondary sources to obtain historical, socio-economic, and cultural information about the industry. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with artisans, elders, community leaders, cooperative members, and government officials, while secondary data were obtained from archival documents and relevant literature. A purposive and snowball sampling approach was used to select 20 respondents with valuable knowledge and experiences related to soapstone mining and carving. Data credibility was enhanced through triangulation of oral and documentary evidence. The collected data were analyzed thematically by identifying patterns and themes related to the historical evolution, livelihood significance, and cultural importance of the soapstone industry (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Development of the Soapstone Industry among the Indigenous Tabaka Community (1900–1980)

The study established that soapstone mining and carving among the indigenous Tabaka community had its



origins in pre-colonial times and was deeply embedded in the social and cultural practices of the community. Respondents indicated that soapstone was initially used for making household items, ritual objects, and decorative materials rather than as a commercial activity. The findings revealed that indigenous knowledge, clan-based ownership of quarry sites, and traditional skills played an important role in sustaining the industry before colonial intervention.

These findings agree with Ochieng (1994), who argues that indigenous communities in western Kenya developed local economic practices based on available natural resources and cultural traditions. Similarly, Akama and Maxon (2006) observed that land and resource ownership among the Abagusii was traditionally organized through clan structures, influencing access to natural resources such as soapstone. The findings also support Ongesa (2010), who emphasized that soapstone objects among the Gusii community had cultural and symbolic meanings beyond their economic value.

The study further established that colonial rule introduced new forms of organization and commercialization that transformed traditional soapstone production. Respondents noted that colonial authorities encouraged production for external markets while introducing taxation and administrative controls. Although commercialization increased demand for soapstone products, local artisans had limited control over pricing and market access. This finding corresponds with Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), who argue that colonial economic systems often structured African resource production to serve external interests rather than local development.

Transformation of the Soapstone Industry during the Post-Independence Period (1963–1980)

The findings revealed that after Kenya gained independence, the soapstone industry expanded as artisans increasingly participated in local and international markets. Respondents reported that tourism growth during the 1960s and 1970s created new opportunities for selling carvings, making soapstone an important source of household income in Tabaka. The formation of artisan groups and cooperatives also contributed to improving production and marketing activities. These findings are consistent with Akama (2017), who noted that cultural tourism in Kenya contributed to the promotion of indigenous crafts and created economic opportunities for local communities. Similarly, Nyamogosa and Murimi (2020) found that cultural products such as soapstone carvings enhanced tourism development by connecting local artisans with domestic and international consumers.

However, the study found that the economic benefits of soapstone production were unevenly distributed. Many artisans depended on intermediaries who controlled pricing and access to external markets. Respondents explained that while their products gained international recognition, they often received limited financial returns compared to the profits generated by traders. This finding supports Hilson (2002), who observed that artisanal mining communities frequently experience economic vulnerability due to weak market structures and limited bargaining power.

Contribution of Soapstone Mining to Livelihoods and Community Development

The study established that soapstone mining contributed significantly to the livelihoods of the Tabaka community by providing employment, household income, and opportunities for entrepreneurship. Artisans, quarry workers, and traders depended on the industry for survival, while related activities such as transportation and tourism benefited indirectly from soapstone production. These findings align with the Sustainable Livelihood Theory of Chambers and Conway (1991), which explains that rural communities depend on combinations of natural, human, social, physical, and financial resources to sustain their livelihoods. In Tabaka, soapstone deposits represented natural capital, while indigenous carving skills formed important human capital. Community networks and artisan groups also strengthened social capital. The findings further agree with Scoones (1998), who argues that livelihood strategies among rural communities depend on adaptability and the ability to combine different resources. The study observed that Tabaka artisans adapted to changing economic conditions by diversifying products, participating in tourism, and forming cooperative structures.



Environmental and Health Challenges Affecting the Soapstone Industry

The study found that although traditional soapstone mining methods caused limited environmental damage, increased extraction over time contributed to land degradation and concerns over resource sustainability. Respondents reported that quarrying activities affected landscapes and reduced the availability of some soapstone deposits. Additionally, artisans identified exposure to soapstone dust as a major health concern, especially among workers who lacked protective equipment. These findings correspond with Mose (2019), who emphasized that artisanal mining requires environmentally responsible practices to reduce ecological damage. Similarly, Kamunda et al. (2018) highlighted that exposure to mining dust can create respiratory health risks among artisanal miners working under unsafe conditions.

Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Identity

The study established that soapstone carving was not merely an economic activity but also an important expression of Tabaka's cultural identity. Respondents emphasized that carving skills were transmitted through generations through apprenticeship and community learning. Traditional designs, techniques, and meanings attached to soapstone products represented the historical experiences and values of the indigenous community. These findings support Sampath (2010), who argues that indigenous knowledge systems are essential for maintaining cultural continuity and sustainable resource use. Similarly, Mogire (2019) notes that traditional craftsmanship preserves community identity while providing economic opportunities.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The study established that the soapstone industry among the indigenous Tabaka community developed from a culturally embedded indigenous practice into a commercially significant artisanal industry between 1900 and 1980. Colonialism introduced market-oriented production but also created inequalities in resource control and profit distribution. After independence, tourism and cooperative development expanded opportunities for artisans, although challenges related to market access, environmental sustainability, and occupational health persisted. Overall, soapstone mining remained a significant contributor to the socio-economic livelihood and cultural identity of the Tabaka community.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the soapstone industry among the indigenous Tabaka community was a historically significant activity that evolved from a traditional cultural practice into an important socio-economic enterprise between 1900 and 1980. The industry was deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, communal resource management, and cultural practices that shaped the identity of the community. Colonial rule transformed the industry through commercialization and external market integration, but it also introduced challenges related to control, taxation, and unequal benefits. After independence, the growth of tourism, artisan groups, and cooperative initiatives enhanced the visibility and economic importance of soapstone carving. However, despite its contribution to livelihoods, the industry continued to face challenges including limited market access, exploitation by intermediaries, environmental degradation, and occupational health risks. The study further concludes that soapstone carving served as both an economic activity and a means of preserving cultural heritage through the transmission of indigenous skills and traditions. Therefore, the historical development of the Tabaka soapstone industry demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of the indigenous community in maintaining cultural practices while responding to changing political and economic circumstances. Sustainable support, environmental conservation, and stronger community-based structures remain essential for preserving the industry's historical and cultural significance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE POLICY AND PRACTICE

Based on the findings, the study recommends that;

1. The government should strengthen support for the Tabaka soapstone industry through improved artisan



cooperatives, access to finance, modern tools, fair marketing systems, and sustainable mining regulations.

2. Stakeholders should promote soapstone carving as cultural heritage by integrating it into tourism programs, supporting value addition, and preserving indigenous carving skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on findings, further studies should;

1. Examine comparative histories of other indigenous artisanal industries in Kenya to understand their socio-economic and cultural contributions.
2. Investigate the environmental impacts, occupational health risks, and sustainable management strategies for the soapstone mining industry in Tabaka.

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