

## A history of agriculture in the urbanization of Kitale, Kenya, 1850–2010

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical relationship between agricultural transformation and the urbanisation of Kitale, Kenya, between 1850 and 2010. It argues that Kitale's emergence and development as an urban centre were closely associated with successive transformations in agrarian relations, agricultural production, infrastructure and markets. The study adopted a historical research design and qualitative approach, drawing on archival records, oral interviews, focus group discussions, government reports and secondary literature. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify participants with relevant historical knowledge. The analysis was guided by the Articulation of Modes of Production Theory and Modernization Theory. The findings demonstrate that indigenous agricultural, pastoral and exchange systems provided the economic and settlement foundations for subsequent development. Colonial rule transformed this agrarian landscape through land alienation, settler agriculture, African labour relations and transport infrastructure. The opening of the railway to Kitale in 1926 strengthened its position as an agricultural and commercial centre. Following independence, land redistribution, the expansion of African commercial farming, agricultural support institutions and market development further stimulated urban growth. The study also reveals that agricultural transformation produced uneven outcomes, reflected in inequalities in access to land and productive resources, changing land-use patterns and increasing pressure on agricultural land. It concludes that agriculture was not merely an economic activity surrounding Kitale but a historical force that shaped its settlement patterns, commercial development, infrastructure and urban identity. The study contributes to understanding the historical relationship between agrarian transformation and the development of secondary urban centres in Kenya.

**Keywords:** Agricultural transformation; agrarian relations; urbanisation; Kitale; colonial agriculture; rural–urban linkages; Trans-Nzoia.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture has historically played an important role in the emergence and development of towns in many parts of Africa. Agricultural production generates food, employment, markets, and economic surpluses, while transport networks, financial institutions, storage facilities, and agro-processing industries often develop around productive agricultural regions. Consequently, urbanization cannot always be understood as a process separate from rural economic transformation. Rather, the growth of towns may be closely connected to changes in agricultural production, commodity exchange, labour relations, and the infrastructure linking rural producers to wider markets (Freund, 2007; Home, 1997; Potts, 2012). Research on agrarian urbanism similarly demonstrates that the boundaries between rural and urban economies are often fluid, with agricultural activities continuing to shape the development of urban settlements (Gururani, 2020).

Kitale provides an important historical case through which to examine these relationships. Located in the fertile Trans-Nzoia highlands of western Kenya, the region possesses favourable climatic conditions and productive agricultural soils that supported human settlement and farming before the establishment of colonial rule. Communities inhabiting the wider region, including the Bukusu, Sabaot, and Pokot, developed diverse economic systems involving crop cultivation, livestock keeping, exchange, and other livelihood activities. These precolonial agrarian and commercial systems formed part of the historical context within which subsequent agricultural and urban transformations occurred. Research on early African agriculture demonstrates the long history of agricultural production and its relationship with settlement, social organization, and exchange across the continent (Lane, 2015). The historical development of Kitale must therefore be situated within a longer history of agrarian settlement rather than understood exclusively as a product of colonial urban planning.

Colonial rule substantially reorganized the relationship between land, agricultural production, labour, and commercial exchange in Trans-Nzoia. The incorporation of the region into the colonial economy involved European settlement, the alienation and reallocation of land, the expansion of commercial agriculture, and the development of infrastructure to facilitate agricultural production and marketing. These changes formed part of the wider colonial transformation of Kenya's agrarian economy, in which land control, labour mobilization, and racial differentiation shaped access to productive resources and economic opportunities (Berman, 1990; Kanogo, 1987; Okoth-Ogendo, 1991). In Trans-Nzoia, European settler agriculture became increasingly associated with commercial crops such as maize and wheat, while African labour contributed to the operation and expansion of the settler economy. The resulting agricultural system was therefore not simply a process of increasing production; it also involved changes in landholding, labour relations, market participation, and the distribution of economic benefits (Kitching, 1980; Leo, 1984; Maxon, 1992).

Transport infrastructure was particularly important in connecting agricultural production to expanding markets. The development of railway and road networks facilitated the movement of agricultural produce, people, and commercial goods, thereby strengthening connections between farming districts and emerging urban centres. Home (1997) demonstrates the importance of infrastructure and colonial planning in the development of British colonial cities, while Freund (2007) situates African urban development within broader histories of colonial economic change and social transformation. In the case of Kitale, the opening of the railway branch in 1926 was a significant development in the region's commercial history. By improving access to external markets, the railway helped create conditions favourable to agricultural marketing and the expansion of Kitale's role as a collection, distribution, and commercial centre. The precise relationship between railway development, agricultural output, and urban expansion, however, requires examination of the relevant archival evidence rather than an assumption that infrastructure automatically produced urban growth.

Existing scholarship provides important foundations for understanding the agrarian and economic transformation of Trans-Nzoia. Maxon (1992) examines the historical development of the district, providing a broader context for understanding settlement and economic change. Nabwera (1987) investigates European settlement and racial domination in the Trans-Nzoia district between 1920 and 1946, highlighting the significance of settler agriculture, land control, and labour relations. Berman (1990) and Kitching (1980) provide broader analyses of colonial power, class formation, and economic change in Kenya, while Okoth-Ogendo (1991) examines the evolution of agrarian law and institutions. These studies help explain the political and economic structures within which commercial agriculture developed. Nevertheless, a more integrated historical explanation is needed to establish how agricultural transformation translated into the growth of Kitale as an urban centre and how that relationship evolved beyond the colonial period.

The postcolonial period introduced further changes in agricultural production, landholding, commercial participation, and regional development. Following independence in 1963, the expansion of African participation in commercial agriculture and the changing organization of agricultural markets influenced the economic relationship between Kitale and its surrounding countryside. Broader studies of Kenya's agrarian economy demonstrate that agricultural commercialization, class formation, and changing patterns of economic participation cannot be separated from the country's political and institutional transformations (Berman & Lonsdale, 1992; Kitching, 1980; Maxon, 1992). At the same time, urban growth created new demands for food, housing, labour, transport, and commercial services. These developments raise questions about how agricultural land and production interacted with the changing spatial and economic structure of Kitale between independence and 2010.

This article addresses these questions by examining agriculture as a historical driver of urbanization in Kitale between 1850 and 2010. It argues that the relationship between agriculture and urbanization was dynamic and mutually constitutive. Agricultural production and commercialization contributed to the emergence and expansion of markets, employment opportunities, migration, transport infrastructure, and commercial services. In turn, urban expansion reshaped agricultural land use, labour relations, commodity exchange, and the organization of production in the surrounding countryside. Rather than interpreting urbanization exclusively as a consequence of population growth, administrative planning, or infrastructure development, the article places agrarian transformation at the centre of Kitale's urban history.

The study examines three broad historical periods. The first, 1850–1895, considers indigenous agrarian systems, settlement patterns, and exchange before the consolidation of colonial rule. The second, 1895–1963, investigates the colonial reorganization of land, labour, commercial agriculture, and transport infrastructure. The third, 1963–2010, examines post-independence agricultural commercialization, changing patterns of economic participation, and the continuing interaction between agricultural production and urban expansion. In connecting these periods, the article contributes to the history of African urbanization by demonstrating how the development of an agricultural town can be understood through the changing relationship between agrarian production, political power, infrastructure, markets, and urban growth.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Agriculture has historically shaped settlement patterns, commercial activities, infrastructure development, and the growth of towns in many parts of Africa. In Kenya, the relationship between agriculture and urbanization became particularly significant in regions where colonial commercial agriculture transformed land use, labour relations, transportation networks, and market systems. Kitale, situated in the agriculturally productive Trans-Nzoia highlands, provides an important case for examining these historical relationships. Its development was closely associated with the region's agricultural potential, the establishment of European settler farming, the expansion of transport infrastructure, and the subsequent commercialization of agriculture. These processes contributed to the emergence of Kitale as an important agricultural and commercial centre.

Existing scholarship has examined several aspects of this transformation. Maxon (1992) explored the historical development of Trans-Nzoia, while Nabwera (1987) investigated European settlement and racial domination in the district during the colonial period. Broader studies have also examined colonial land policies, agrarian institutions, and the relationship between economic change and social class in Kenya (Berman, 1990; Kitching, 1980; Okoth-Ogendo, 1991). Although these works provide valuable insights into the political, social, and economic transformation of the region, there remains a need for a more integrated historical examination of how agricultural changes contributed to Kitale's emergence, spatial expansion, and economic development over the longer period from 1850 to 2010.

In particular, the relationship between precolonial agrarian systems and early settlement patterns, colonial agricultural commercialization and urban growth, and post-independence agricultural development and urban expansion requires further investigation. Examining these interconnected processes is important for understanding whether, how, and under what historical conditions agriculture influenced Kitale's transformation from a settlement within an established agrarian landscape into a significant urban centre. It is equally important to establish how the growth of the town subsequently affected agricultural land use, labour, markets, and production in the surrounding countryside.

The central problem addressed by this study is therefore the limited integration of agricultural transformation into the historical explanation of Kitale's urbanization between 1850 and 2010. The study investigates the changing relationship between agriculture and urban growth across three historical periods: 1850–1895, when indigenous agrarian systems and settlement patterns predominated; 1895–1963, when colonial rule reorganized landholding, agricultural production, labour, and transport infrastructure; and 1963–2010, when post-independence agricultural commercialization and changing urban land use influenced the relationship between the town and its agricultural hinterland. Therefore, the study seeks to establish the historical processes through which agriculture contributed to Kitale's development and how urban expansion, in turn, transformed the surrounding agrarian economy.

## 1.3 Research Objectives

- i. To trace the development of Kitale in regard to agrarian changes and early settlements, 1850-1895.
- ii. To examine the impact of colonial agriculture on the growth of Kitale town 1895-1963.
- iii. To assess the agricultural trends on the growth of Kitale town 1963-2010

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

#### 2.1.1 Articulation of Modes of Production Theory

This study is guided by the Articulation of Modes of Production Theory and Modernization Theory. These perspectives provide complementary explanations of the relationship between agricultural transformation and the urbanization of Kitale, Kenya, between 1850 and 2010.

The Articulation of Modes of Production perspective explains how different economic systems coexist and interact, with pre-capitalist production systems being incorporated into or subordinated to capitalist relations. Mafeje (1981) provides a relevant theoretical foundation for examining these relationships in African societies. Applied to Kitale, the perspective helps explain how indigenous agrarian systems, local exchange, and communal land relations were transformed by colonial land policies, settler agriculture, wage labour, and commercial markets (Berman, 1990; Maxon, 1992; Okoth-Ogendo, 1991). It also provides a framework for investigating the persistence or transformation of colonial agrarian relationships after independence.

#### 2.1.2 Modernization Theory

Modernization Theory, particularly Rostow (1960) model of economic development, emphasizes changes in production, technology, infrastructure, and markets. In this study, it helps explain how agricultural commercialization, transport infrastructure, and expanding markets contributed to Kitale's emergence and growth as an agricultural and commercial centre (Freund, 2007; Home, 1997). However, modernization did not necessarily produce equitable

development, as colonial land alienation and unequal access to productive resources shaped the distribution of economic opportunities (Berman, 1990; Kanogo, 1987).

The two theories are therefore complementary: the Articulation of Modes of Production perspective explains the historical interaction between economic systems and unequal power relations, while Modernization Theory illuminates changes in agricultural production, infrastructure, and commercial activity. Together, they provide a framework for examining how agrarian transformation shaped Kitale's urbanization and how urban expansion subsequently influenced agricultural land use, labour, and markets between 1850 and 2010.

## 2.2 Empirical Review

Existing scholarship on agriculture and urbanization in Kenya has largely examined the two processes separately, with considerable attention given to colonial land policies, settler agriculture, labour relations, and commercial development. Berman and Lonsdale (1992) demonstrate how colonial economic transformation generated conflicts over land, labour, political authority, and social organization. Similarly, Kanogo (1987) illustrates the centrality of African labour and land struggles to the development of settler agriculture. These studies provide important insights into the political and economic structures underlying agricultural transformation in colonial Kenya, although they do not specifically examine how these processes influenced the long-term urbanization of Kitale.

Research focusing on Trans-Nzoia provides a more direct historical context. Nabwera (1987) examines European settlement and racial domination in the district, highlighting the significance of land allocation, settler agricultural production, and African labour in establishing the colonial agricultural economy. Maxon (1992) similarly provides a historical account of settlement, economic transformation, and political struggles in Trans-Nzoia. Although these studies establish the importance of colonial agriculture in shaping the region's economy, their principal emphasis is on settler development and colonial transformation rather than the relationship between agricultural change and Kitale's subsequent urban growth.

The post-independence period is complemented by Muller's examination of the Kenyanisation of trade in Kitale, which provides insights into changing commercial ownership and economic participation. However, the study's emphasis on trade leaves further scope for examining how agricultural production, commercialization, and rural–urban market relationships contributed to the expansion of Kitale's commercial and urban functions.

The literature therefore reveals a gap in the historical integration of agricultural transformation and urbanization in Kitale. While previous studies have examined land relations, labour, settler agriculture, and commercial development, limited attention has been devoted to how these processes interacted across precolonial, colonial, and post-independence periods to shape the town's emergence and expansion. This study addresses that gap by examining agriculture as a central component of Kitale's urban history between 1850 and 2010, focusing on the changing relationships between agrarian production, infrastructure, markets, and urban growth.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a historical research design using a qualitative approach to examine the relationship between agriculture and the urbanisation of Kitale, Kenya, between 1850 and 2010. This design was appropriate because it enabled the systematic collection, evaluation and interpretation of historical evidence to establish patterns of continuity, change and relationships between past and present developments. Data were obtained from archival documents, oral interviews, focus group discussions and secondary literature. The historical approach also facilitated the examination of the authenticity, credibility and validity of sources through critical evaluation and triangulation.

### 3.2 Study area

The study was conducted in Kitale, the administrative headquarters of Trans-Nzoia County in western Kenya. Located between Mount Elgon and the Cherangany Hills, Kitale is an important agricultural, commercial and administrative centre. Its historical development is closely associated with agricultural production, particularly the cultivation and marketing of commercial crops. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, Kitale had a population of approximately 162,174 (City Population, 2019). The town was selected because its development provides an appropriate context for examining how agricultural transformation, land-use changes, migration and commercial activities influenced urban growth. Figure 1 presents the location of the study area.

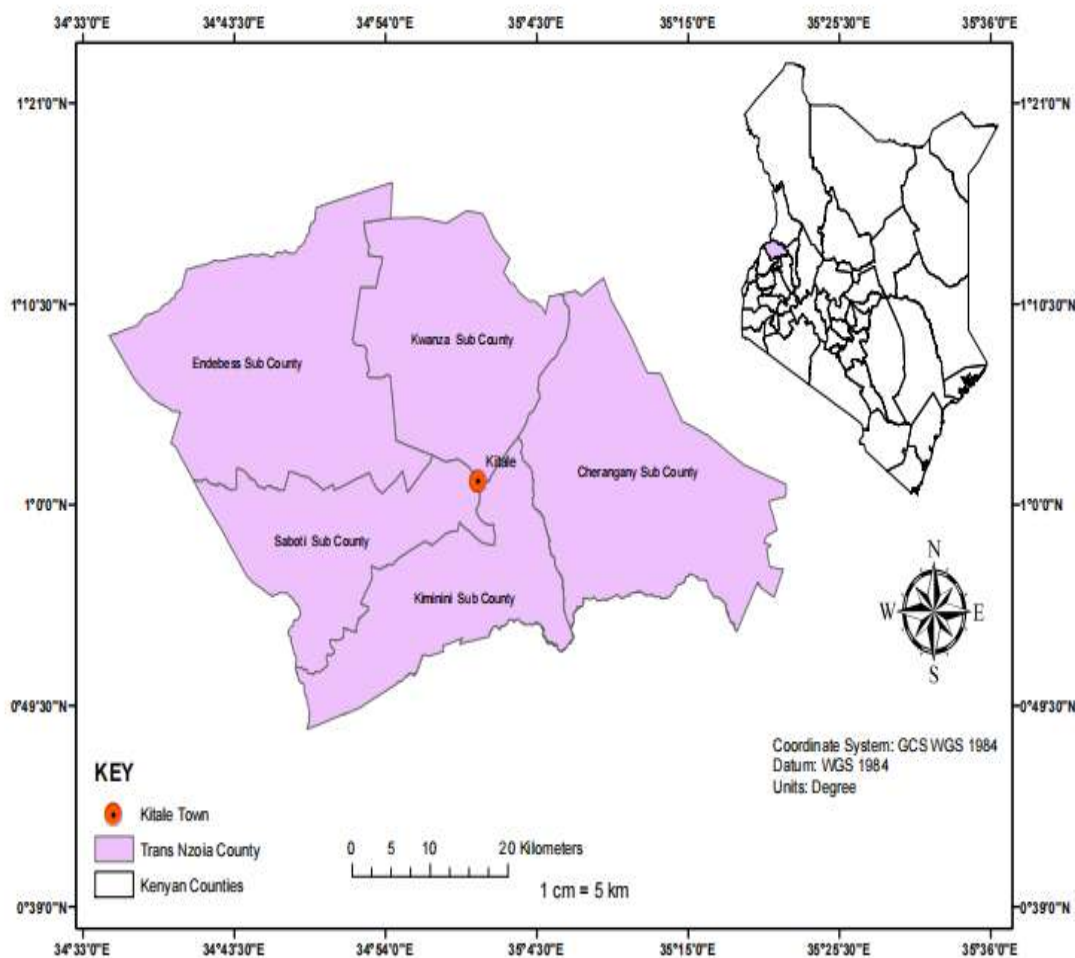


**Figure 1:** Map of Trans Nzoia County

**Source:** GIS expert, SDMHA, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology

### 3.3 Target Population

The target population comprised individuals with relevant knowledge and experience of the historical relationship between agriculture and urbanisation in Kitale. These included farmers, traders, agricultural officers, county officials and community elders. These categories were considered important because of their knowledge and experiences relating to agricultural practices, land ownership, commercial activities, migration and the historical development of the town.

### 3.4 Sampling and Data collection

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to identify participants with relevant historical knowledge and experience. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals who could provide information on agricultural transformation and urban development, while snowball sampling facilitated the identification of additional knowledgeable respondents through referrals. Efforts were made to include participants from different sub-counties and relevant community groups to obtain diverse perspectives. The study involved 51 participants, comprising 27 individual interview respondents and 24 focus group discussion participants. Three focus group discussions were conducted, with eight participants in each group. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by the repetition of information and the absence of substantially new insights.

### 3.5 Data Collection Methods and Sources

The study utilised both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained through archival research, semi-structured key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Archival research was conducted at the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi between 6 and 20 August 2025. The researcher examined colonial records, annual

reports, and official correspondence and administrative documents relating to agricultural development, land use, transport infrastructure and commercial activities in Kitale. These records provided historical evidence for corroborating information obtained through oral sources and secondary literature.

Key informant interviews were conducted face-to-face using a semi-structured interview guide. Respondents were selected based on their knowledge and experience of agricultural practices, land relations, colonial agricultural policies, migration and the development of Kitale. Open-ended questions and follow-up probes enabled the collection of detailed historical and socioeconomic accounts. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, and information was recorded and supplemented with field notes.

Three focus group discussions were conducted with purposively selected participants, including farmers, traders and young people involved in agriculture. Each group comprised eight participants. The discussions explored shared experiences and perspectives on agricultural change, land use, settlement patterns, markets and urban development. Group interaction also enabled the identification of areas of agreement and disagreement and provided an opportunity to corroborate information obtained through individual interviews.

Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, theses, government publications and other relevant historical literature consulted at the libraries of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Egerton University and the Kenya National Library, among other sources. These materials provided historical context, informed the theoretical interpretation and facilitated comparison with primary evidence.

### 3.5 Data Analysis and Presentation

The study employed qualitative content and thematic analysis to examine information obtained from archival records, interviews, focus group discussions and secondary literature. Interview and focus group recordings were transcribed, while documentary materials and field notes were organised systematically. The data were repeatedly reviewed, coded and grouped into themes and sub-themes corresponding to the research objectives. These included agrarian change, land tenure, agricultural policies, labour relations, settlement patterns, infrastructure development, market growth and urbanisation. The analysis was also organised chronologically to capture developments between 1850 and 2010.

Triangulation was used to enhance the credibility of the findings by comparing archival evidence, oral accounts and secondary literature. Contradictory accounts were critically examined in relation to their historical context and corroborating evidence. The findings were interpreted using the Articulation of Modes of Production Theory and Modernization Theory to explain the interaction between agricultural transformation and urban growth. Results were presented thematically and chronologically through narrative discussion, supported by relevant interview quotations, archival records, maps and tables where appropriate.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. The researcher obtained an introductory letter from the Directorate of Postgraduate Studies at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology and a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Relevant permissions were also sought from county and local administrative authorities and institutions holding archival materials. Participation was voluntary, and the purpose of the study was explained to respondents before data collection. Informed consent was obtained before interviews and focus group discussions, while separate consent was sought for audio recording. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity where required, and their right to decline questions or withdraw from the study without penalty.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1 Indigenous Agrarian Systems and Early Settlement Patterns, 1850–1895

Before colonial rule, the area that later became Kitale was characterised by diverse indigenous communities with distinct but interacting agricultural, pastoral and exchange systems. Communities including the Bukusu, Sabao and Pokot practised different combinations of crop cultivation and livestock keeping, complemented by hunting, ironworking and local trade. These activities formed part of wider livelihood systems adapted to local ecological conditions. Historical studies of the Pokot, for example, demonstrate the importance of established agricultural knowledge, livestock keeping and irrigation practices in the precolonial economy of north-western Kenya (Davies and Moore, 2016). Similarly, research on the Bukusu documents the development of indigenous industries, including ironworking, as integral components of their economic organisation (Nangulu, 1990).

Agricultural production was largely organised around household needs, customary landholding arrangements and local exchange. Land was an important economic and social resource, with access and use regulated through kinship

relations, community institutions and customary practices. Cultivation, grazing and access to other natural resources were influenced by ecological conditions, including soil fertility, rainfall and the availability of water and pasture. These arrangements supported livelihoods and shaped patterns of settlement and interaction among communities in the wider Trans-Nzoia region. However, indigenous landholding and production arrangements were not uniform across the different communities, and agricultural and pastoral activities varied according to local environments and livelihood strategies (Davies and Moore, 2016; Namunyu, 2020).

The significance of these agrarian systems lies in the economic and geographical foundation they provided for subsequent agricultural transformation. The area's agricultural potential, existing settlement patterns and local systems of production and exchange became important considerations in the later colonial appropriation and commercial exploitation of land. Historical research on Trans-Nzoia indicates that African settlement predated European occupation and that settlers encountered African families already living on land subsequently allocated to European farmers (Nabwera, 1987). Although Kitale had not yet developed as a formal urban centre during this period, its surrounding agrarian landscape provided the setting upon which colonial settlement; commercial farming and later urban development were established.

Viewed through the Articulation of Modes of Production Theory, these indigenous economic arrangements constituted established production systems that were subsequently incorporated into and subordinated to colonial capitalist relations. Colonialism did not simply introduce agriculture into an economically inactive region; rather, it transformed existing systems of land access, production, labour and exchange. This distinction is important in understanding the historical transition from indigenous agrarian organisation to a commercially oriented agricultural economy.

#### 4.2 Colonial Agriculture and the Transformation of Kitale, 1895–1963

Colonial rule fundamentally transformed land ownership, agricultural production and labour relations in the Kitale region. The arrival of European settlers in the early twentieth century was encouraged by the area's fertile soils and favourable climatic conditions, which supported large-scale agricultural production. Colonial land policies facilitated the alienation of land for European settlement, progressively restricting African communities' access to some of the region's most productive agricultural areas.

Mukile Andrew, an interviewee from Matisi, recalled:

*"The colonial settlers started arriving in Kitale during the early 1900s after the British administration declared the area suitable for white settlement. They were attracted by the fertile land and cool climate. Local communities were slowly pushed away from their ancestral lands as Europeans established large farms"* (Mukile Andrew, (88years) Oral Interview at Matisi on 11/07/2025).

Although this account represents a retrospective recollection rather than direct eyewitness evidence of the earliest settler arrivals, it illustrates the community's understanding of the relationship between European settlement and the loss of ancestral land. The recollection is consistent with the wider historical process through which colonial authorities made land available to European settlers and established a racially differentiated system of land access. The Crown Lands Ordinance of 1915 expanded the colonial state's powers over land classified as Crown Land, while the subsequent delineation of African reserves and the legal arrangements of the 1930s further entrenched racial separation in land administration (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991; Kenya Land Commission, 1934). Historical accounts of Trans-Nzoia also document the displacement of African communities, including the Sabaot, to facilitate European settlement (Nabwera, 1987; Maxon, 1992).

The consequences of these policies were reflected in the unequal distribution of agricultural land. European settlers acquired extensive holdings in fertile areas and established commercial farms, while many African households experienced restrictions on land ownership, cultivation and grazing. Kemboi Mike, interviewed at Kapsitwet, explained:

*"The White Highlands were set aside for European settlers only. Africans were restricted from owning land there. This policy increased racial segregation and encouraged large-scale settler farming in Kitale"* (Kemboi Mike, (43 years) Oral Interview at Kapsitwet in 20/09/2025).

Kemboi's testimony illustrates the perceived relationship between racial land policies and the expansion of settler agriculture. It also highlights how the colonial land system created unequal opportunities for agricultural production. European farmers gained access to extensive landholdings, whereas African communities faced restrictions that undermined their ability to expand independent farming enterprises. Kuria Joram's interview at Moronjo Farm similarly emphasised the restrictions imposed on African access to land in the former settler areas.

Kuria Joram said:

*"The White Highlands were set aside for European settlers only. Africans were restricted from owning land there. This policy increased racial segregation and encouraged large-scale settler farming in Kitale"* (Kuria Joram, (67 years) Oral Interview at Moronjo farm in 12/07/2025).

The resulting displacement contributed to the movement of some African households into reserves and others into labour arrangements on European farms. Arasa Monica, interviewed at Kapsitwet, recalled:

*"Africans were pushed into overcrowded reserves with poor soils, making farming difficult. Many people became poor because they had little land and limited economic opportunities"* (Arasa Monica, (60 years) Oral Interview at Kapsitwet on 12/07/2025).

This testimony highlights the socioeconomic consequences of land alienation, particularly the relationship between restricted access to productive land, declining agricultural opportunities and economic vulnerability. The colonial land system therefore transformed not only ownership patterns but also the conditions under which African households could sustain their livelihoods.

Colonial taxation and labour policies further connected African households to settler agriculture. Hut and poll taxes increased the need for cash income, encouraging many Africans to seek wage employment. Labour regulations and recruitment practices also restricted workers' economic choices. Some displaced Africans entered the squatter system, under which residence and access to cultivation or grazing land on settler farms were linked to the provision of labour. These arrangements increasingly subjected African households to settler control and weakened their economic independence. Historical studies of colonial Kenya demonstrate how labour regulations, including the Resident Native Labour Ordinance of 1919, altered tenancy arrangements and strengthened settler control over African labour (Stichter, 1982; Kanogo, 1987).

Kibet Mathew, interviewed at Kapsitwet, described the effect of colonial labour demands on African livelihoods: *"When the colonial government was in power, Africans were forced to work on European settler farms, constructing of roads and participated in government projects. The colonial authorities used labor laws and other regulations to compel Africans to provide labor, leaving them with limited freedom to choose their work. This made it difficult for many Africans to concentrate on their own farms because they had to divide their time between their agricultural activities and work demanded by the colonial administration"* (Kibet Mathew, (76 years) Oral Interview at Kapsitwet on 18/07/2025).

Kibet's account illustrates how colonial labour demands affected the organisation of African agricultural production. The requirement to provide labour on settler farms and participate in public works reduced the time and resources available for household farming. This contributed to the incorporation of African households into the colonial wage economy, although subsistence production and other indigenous economic practices continued. From the perspective of the Articulation of Modes of Production Theory, this was not simply the replacement of one economic system by another; it was the subordination and reorganisation of indigenous production within an expanding capitalist agricultural economy.

Colonial transformation also changed the nature and scale of agricultural production. Settler farmers increasingly oriented production towards commercial markets, particularly through the cultivation of cereals and the development of livestock enterprises. The Kitale agricultural environment attracted experimentation with different crop varieties. Archival evidence from the Kenya National Archives records trials of cash crops and green manure crops in the Nakuru and Kitale areas during 1932 (KNA/MSS115/25/14). Among the horticultural experiments, onion varieties were evaluated at Sabwani Estate. The October 1931 dry spell affected the onion nurseries, but subsequent observations in December 1932 indicated that the Early Hunter River and Yellow Bermuda varieties produced satisfactory bulbs under Kitale conditions (Leo, 1984).

These experiments demonstrate the growing importance of agricultural research and crop adaptation in the development of commercial farming. They also illustrate how colonial agricultural initiatives sought to identify crops suited to local ecological conditions. Orone Albert, interviewed at Matisi, recalled:

*"Settlers introduced crops such as maize, wheat, coffee and pyrethrum for commercial export. Large farms focused mainly on producing crops for international markets"* (Orone Albert, (87 years) Oral Interview at Matisi on 15/07/2025).

Orone's account reflects the community's recollection of the expansion of commercial agriculture under settler farming. The development of commercial production transformed the relationship between agricultural output and exchange, as farming became increasingly connected to wider markets rather than being organised primarily around household consumption. Nevertheless, the extent and relative importance of each crop should be established through contemporary agricultural reports before describing all of them as major export crops in Kitale.

The expansion of commercial agriculture also required changes in land use, labour organisation, transport and agricultural services. Roads, railway connections and storage facilities became important for moving produce and supplying farms with inputs. Omari Dickson, interviewed at Hamisi, observed:

*"Roads, railways, storage facilities, and processing factories were developed mainly to support settler agriculture and export trade"* (Omari Dickson, (67 years) Oral Interview at Hamisi on 15/10/2025)

This recollection points to the close relationship between agricultural production and infrastructure development. Transport and storage facilities helped connect farms to markets, while commercial activities generated demand for traders, transport operators and other agricultural services. Such developments contributed to the gradual emergence of Kitale as an agricultural and administrative centre. However, the extent to which particular facilities directly stimulated urban expansion should be established through archival records and historical evidence on the development of the town.

Colonial commercial agriculture also transformed the social and economic structure of the region. The concentration of productive land among European settlers, the dependence of many African households on wage labour and the growth of trade produced increasingly differentiated economic groups. Ombaki Joshua, interviewed at Matisi, observed:

*"Colonial agriculture created differences between wealthy landowners, laborers, traders and peasants, changing the social structure"* (Ombaki Joshua, (79 years) Oral Interview at Matisi in 20/10/2025).

Ombaki's account illustrates the social differentiation associated with the expansion of capitalist agricultural production. While settlers controlled extensive agricultural holdings, African labourers and small-scale producers occupied more restricted economic positions. Traders and other intermediaries also became increasingly important in the commercial agricultural economy. These changes support the interpretation that colonialism restructured existing economic relationships while incorporating African labour and production into a wider capitalist system.

Overall, colonial agriculture transformed the Kitale region through land alienation, commercial crop production, labour reorganisation and infrastructure development. These processes established an agricultural economy increasingly oriented towards markets and provided an important economic foundation for Kitale's subsequent urban growth. Nevertheless, the benefits of agricultural expansion were distributed unequally, reflecting the racial and class divisions embedded in the colonial political economy.

#### 4.3 Post-Independence Agricultural Transformation and the Growth of Kitale, 1963–2010

Independence in 1963 created opportunities to transform the colonial land and agricultural system. One of the most significant interventions was the Million-Acre Settlement Scheme, implemented during the independence transition and subsequent years, with British financial support and other development assistance. The scheme facilitated the acquisition and redistribution of former European-owned farms to African settlers in different parts of the country, including the wider Trans-Nzoia region (Leo, 1984). It sought to address landlessness, expand African participation in commercial agriculture and promote agricultural development.

However, the redistribution of land did not benefit all communities equally. Kibet Vincent, interviewed at Lyavo, explained:

*"Africans started acquiring land through settlement schemes. However, not everybody benefited equally because influential individuals and wealthy families obtained larger portions of land. Some ordinary people remained landless despite the government promises made during the independence period"* (Kibet Vincent, (34 years) Oral Interview at Lyavo on 12/11/2025).

Kibet's testimony highlights the unequal outcomes of post-independence land redistribution. Although settlement schemes expanded African access to agricultural land, differences in economic resources, influence and access to settlement opportunities shaped who benefited most. The transition from settler-dominated agriculture to African land ownership therefore did not automatically eliminate historical inequalities in land distribution.

Despite these limitations, the settlement schemes contributed to the expansion of African commercial farming in Trans-Nzoia. Kibor Sylvia, interviewed at Tuwani, recalled:

*"Settlement schemes increased agricultural production because more Africans gained access to fertile land previously reserved for settlers. Families began growing maize, wheat, beans, and keeping dairy cattle. This expanded food production and strengthened Kitale's reputation as an important agricultural region after independence within Kenya's developing post-colonial economy"* (Kibor Sylvia, (40 years) Oral Interview at Tuwani on 13/11/2025).

Kibor's account demonstrates how access to land enabled more African households to participate in commercial and market-oriented agriculture. The expansion of maize and wheat cultivation, together with dairy production, strengthened agricultural activity in the region. It also increased the importance of Kitale as a centre through which agricultural produce could be marketed and related services accessed.

The growth of African commercial farming strengthened the economic relationship between surrounding rural areas and Kitale town. Agricultural producers depended on the town for the sale of produce, the purchase of farm inputs and access to transport, financial and commercial services. Chemutai Beatrice, interviewed at Cherangany, explained:

*"The redistribution process encouraged commercial farming, which generated income and stimulated local trade. Farmers sold produce in Kitale town, creating opportunities for traders, transporters and shop owners. Increased economic activity contributed to urban expansion as more people moved to the town seeking employment and business opportunities"* (Chemutai Beatrice, (32 years) Oral Interview at Cherangany'I on 15/10/ 2025).

This testimony provides a direct explanation of the rural–urban relationship generated by agricultural commercialisation. Farmers' demand for markets and services stimulated commercial activity in Kitale, while the growth of trade created opportunities for transport operators, shop owners and other service providers. Agricultural production therefore contributed to urban development beyond the farm sector itself. It generated economic linkages that connected rural producers to an expanding urban economy.

The effectiveness of post-independence agricultural transformation was also influenced by government support and institutional interventions. These included agricultural extension services, credit and technical assistance, improved seeds, fertilisers, research and cooperative development. Kibet Shadrack, interviewed at the Trans-Nzoia County offices, observed:

*"Government agencies coordinated the purchase of former settler farms and distributed land to African families through settlement schemes. They introduced loans and technical assistance to support agricultural production. Despite these efforts, delays in administration and inadequate funding limited the effectiveness of some settlement projects across Trans-Nzoia"* (Kibet Shadrack, (30 years) Oral Interview at Trans Nzoia County Offices on 25/11/2025).

This account highlights both the opportunities and institutional constraints associated with post-independence agricultural reform. Land redistribution and technical assistance facilitated African participation in commercial farming, but administrative delays and inadequate financial resources limited the effectiveness of some interventions. The experience suggests that access to land alone was insufficient to guarantee successful commercial production without complementary investment, credit and agricultural services.

Mwale Obed, interviewed at the Trans-Nzoia County offices, similarly emphasised the importance of agricultural support:

*"After independence, many Africans entered commercial farming because they finally had access to fertile land. Maize farming expanded rapidly, and dairy farming also became important. Government support through extension services and cooperatives encouraged production, making agriculture the backbone of economic growth and development in Kitale"* (Mwale Obed, (35 years) Oral Interview at Trans Nzoia County offices on 10/01/2026).

Mwale's testimony reinforces the relationship between land access, agricultural services and commercial production. The expansion of maize and dairy farming created demand for input suppliers, produce traders, transport services and agricultural marketing institutions. These activities strengthened Kitale's role as a commercial centre serving the surrounding farming population.

The Royals' community group, during a focus group discussion held in Kitale town, also described the contribution of government agricultural interventions:

*"The government encouraged the cultivation of maize by giving incentives such as subsidized fertilizers, seeds, and farming education. Organizations like the National Cereals and Produce Board helped the farmers market their produce. Such measures led to the increased production of food and made Kitale one of the leading agricultural districts in Kenya. The agricultural sector underwent several reforms that aimed at transforming agriculture using new farming technologies and research. The farmers were advised to embrace new methods of farming. The livestock industry was also boosted as veterinary care and dairy cooperatives became more popular"* (Simiyu Victoria, (65 years) Oral Interview at Matisi on 13/07/2025).

The focus group account illustrates how participants understood the contribution of government support, improved farming technologies, agricultural marketing and livestock services to regional agricultural development. The National Cereals and Produce Board, established in 1985, subsequently played a role in grain marketing and storage. Extension services, improved inputs, veterinary care and dairy cooperatives also supported agricultural production and commercial exchange. These interventions were important in connecting agricultural producers to the expanding urban market and service economy of Kitale.

From the perspective of Modernization Theory, these developments reflected the increasing adoption of improved agricultural technologies, institutional support and market-oriented production in the transformation of the agricultural economy (Rostow, 1960; Todaro and Smith, 2011). In Trans-Nzoia, the expansion of agricultural research, extension services, improved farming inputs and commercial production contributed to the changing organisation of agriculture. The development of marketing and service institutions further strengthened Kitale's economic functions as a centre serving the surrounding agricultural hinterland. However, the unequal benefits of land redistribution, differences

in access to credit and variations in farmers' productive capacities indicate that agricultural modernisation did not produce uniform outcomes. These uneven outcomes are consistent with broader analyses of agrarian transformation in Kenya, which demonstrate that access to land, capital and productive resources has historically influenced the distribution of agricultural opportunities (Kitching, 1980; Leo, 1984).

The relationship between agriculture and urbanisation was also increasingly reciprocal. Agricultural production stimulated demand for urban markets, transport, storage and commercial services, while the expansion of Kitale created opportunities for farmers to sell produce and obtain agricultural inputs. This relationship reflects the wider argument that urban centres and their surrounding rural economies are economically interdependent, particularly where agricultural production supports urban trade and service activities (Freund, 2007; Gururani, 2020). At the same time, population growth and the expansion of residential, commercial and institutional developments placed pressure on land previously used for farming. The resulting changes illustrate the increasingly complex relationship between agricultural production, land-use change and urban expansion.

Taken together, the post-independence experience demonstrates that land redistribution, the expansion of African commercial farming, agricultural support institutions and market development contributed to Kitale's growth as an agricultural and commercial centre. Agriculture remained central to the town's economic development, although its relationship with urban growth was increasingly shaped by changing land use, population movement and the expansion of non-agricultural activities. This experience supports the argument that secondary towns in Africa have often developed through close economic relationships with their surrounding agricultural hinterlands (Freund, 2007; Potts, 2012).

The findings across the three historical periods demonstrate that Kitale's urbanisation was closely associated with successive transformations in agrarian relations. Indigenous production and exchange provided the early economic foundation; colonial rule reorganised land, labour and production around settler capitalism; and post-independence reforms expanded African participation in commercial agriculture and strengthened rural–urban economic linkages. Viewed through the Articulation of Modes of Production Theory, these developments illustrate the historical interaction between indigenous production systems and successive forms of capitalist agricultural organisation. Through these processes, agriculture became not only a source of production and employment but also an important influence on the historical emergence and growth of Kitale as an urban centre.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the historical relationship between agricultural transformation and the urbanisation of Kitale, Kenya, between 1850 and 2010. The findings demonstrate that agriculture was central to Kitale's emergence and development as an agricultural and commercial centre. During the precolonial period, indigenous agricultural, pastoral and exchange systems shaped settlement patterns and provided the economic foundation for subsequent transformation. Colonial rule fundamentally reorganised these systems through land alienation, settler agriculture, labour relations and the development of transport infrastructure, strengthening Kitale's commercial importance while creating enduring inequalities in access to land and productive resources. Following independence, land redistribution, the expansion of African commercial farming, agricultural support institutions and market development further strengthened the town's economic functions and its links with the surrounding rural areas.

The study establishes that Kitale's urbanisation was neither independent of agriculture nor simply a consequence of administrative nor population growth. Rather, it evolved through the changing relationship between agricultural production, land ownership, labour, infrastructure and markets. Agriculture stimulated urban trade, transport and service activities, while urban expansion created new markets and opportunities for agricultural producers but also increased pressure on farmland. The findings demonstrate the reciprocal and historically changing relationship between agrarian transformation and urban development, contributing to a broader understanding of the development of agricultural towns in Kenya.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that Trans-Nzoia County Government strengthen integrated urban and land-use planning to manage the conversion of agricultural land and protect productive farming areas as Kitale expands. Greater investment in agricultural infrastructure, including storage, processing, rural roads and market facilities, is also necessary to strengthen linkages between farmers and urban markets, promote value addition and increase agricultural incomes. Furthermore, national and county governments should improve smallholder farmers' access to affordable credit, modern agricultural technologies, extension services and reliable markets to ensure that the benefits of agricultural modernisation are more inclusive. Finally, county institutions, universities and historical organisations should support

the documentation and preservation of archival materials and oral histories relating to Kitale's agricultural and urban development, thereby strengthening the historical record and informing future planning.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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