



# The role of the gusii soapstone industry in promoting sustainable livelihoods: a historical perspective

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## Abstract

Soapstone production in the Gusii region is one of the oldest traditional handcraft industries in Kenya. The history of the industry dates back hundreds and perhaps even thousands of years. Initially made as traditional handcraft for local use over the years, the products have been transformed into tourist items that are sold to both domestic and international tourists. Currently, the soapstone handcraft products have become part of the milieu of the Kenyan tourism industry, and are sold in major handcraft shops all over the world. The aim of this paper was twofold: first, to provide an historical analysis on the transformation of the soapstone carvings from items that had majorly utility value to handicraft attractions that are sold to tourists; second, to examine the role of the industry in promoting sustainable livelihood among the people of Tabaka in the Gusii region. Data for this study was acquired through in depth conversational interview schedules with selected soapstone producers, conversations with key informants and also via field observations. The research provides some useful recommendations that can guide policy formation for the sustainable development of the soapstone industry.

**Keywords:** Gusii soapstone, sustainable livelihoods, Tabaka handcraft production, sustainable tourism.

## Introduction

Soapstone sculpturing together with iron making/working, basketry, leather-works and several other types of weaving are among the oldest traditional industries that existed among the Gusii people. All these industries, apart from soapstone, were used mainly to produce goods for utility purposes such as hoes, arrows, spears, axes, knives and razors, baskets and other implements.

It should be noted that, at the advent of colonialism and at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Europeans came into Kenya with mass produced finished goods that looked better and convenient to use. Consequently, the traditional items lost their appeal. Moreover, the African people such as the Gusii were forced to abandon the local industrial products because they could not compete favorably with the mass produced European products (Ong'esa, 2011). In this regard, most local industries such as iron working were suffocated to a halt, and eventually disappeared.

The soapstone industry has, however, survived the colonial times and developed into a major art form mainly for the tourism market. This paper thus, aims at finding out the reasons behind the resilience of the Gusii soapstone industry. There are three objectives; one is to provide an historical analysis of the transformation of the soapstone industry; two is to examine the role of



tourism in enhancing the resilience and/or the survivability of the soapstone industry, and; finally, to examine the role of the industry in promoting sustainable livelihood among the Gusii people. Historically, the Gusii belong to the Western Kenya Bantu speakers and they are currently domiciled in the Southern Western Highland region of Kenya (Ochieng'; 1974; Akama & Maxon, 2006).

## **Methodology**

A combination of different methodologies were used to obtain data for this study. The researchers used both primary and secondary sources of data collection. To obtain primary data, semi-structured interviews were conducted at both individual and group level. Open-ended questions were used to collect data in order to allow respondents freedom to give as much information as possible on various aspects of the soapstone industry. Archival sources were also used as important sources of information. The researchers targeted annual reports, trade books, district records, and any other relevant archival material. This was done at the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi. The archival information was used to corroborate or refute the authenticity of the views expressed in oral interviews and secondary data.

The field research was conducted between August 2017 and December 2017 in South Mugirango Constituency (i.e. Tabaka area) where most of the soapstone resources and soapstone sculpturing activities are situated. With consent, seventy respondents were interviewed during the research (i.e. ethical standards were adhered to in the course of this research). The researchers interviewed respondents born in the 1930s – 1940s because they who most likely understood the growth of the soapstone industry, as narrated by Gusii elders, through the colonial period to the present time. They also had recollections of other pertinent information about the soapstone industry's origin that they heard from their own parents and grandparents. Therefore, they were expected to be more knowledgeable and resourceful than the youth. The researchers interviewed twenty respondents in this group owing to their scarcity because of age and experience (i.e., most of the people in this age category have since passed on).

Oral interviews were used at both individual and group level. Guided questions were used in areas, such as means of acquisition of soapstone raw materials, skill acquisition, and distribution and marketing of industrial products. Formulation of questions on the spot was also an important part of the interview to get details not captured in the other questions. Several criteria were used in selecting the respondents. Purposive sampling was used to select artwork or handicrafts, individuals, groups and organizations that would provide the greatest insight into the phenomena under study on the basis of their involvement in/and of the industries under research. This technique was used because, these were the only people in these critical capacities and they were necessary for the study.

## **Soapstone Industry during the Pre-Colonial Period**

According to existing archaeological evidence, the soapstone industry in the Gusii region goes back to over one thousand years, although the exact dates as to when soapstone sculpturing started cannot be ascertained (Eisemon et al, 1988; Ochieng, 1994; Inyega, 2001). One of the earliest sites where pioneer soapstone carvings and other forms of art works have been found is in a place known as Goti Chaki near Tabaka (the current epicenter of soapstone production) in the Southern parts of Gusii land. Some of the ancient soapstone rock-art paintings that are still observable at Goti Chaki Hills include scribbling of wild animal images on the soapstone and rudimentary items such as small household utensils.



Eisemon, (1988) contends that soapstone carving in Gusii land was started by the people of Bomware Sub-clan near Goti Chaki Hills. The inhabitants of Bomware are also associated with the art of iron smelting, an indigenous activity that was shrouded with secretive indigenous knowledge and skills. A contemporary famous Gusii soapstone sculpture, Elkanah Ong'esa (2010), also contends that the earliest forms of soapstone carvings were made before the Gusii settled in their current homeland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This line of thought has been corroborated by other contemporary soapstone sculptors who state that the hill carvings at Goti Chaki were made by earlier people who were, probably, non-Gusii. Indeed, these were the original initiators of the soapstone art from who the Gusii people copied the art of soapstone sculpturing (Sharman, 1971).

Among the rock carvings at Goti Chaki are *Ajua* boards and concentric rings, that indicate that the local people who made these carvings were ardent players of the indigenous African game of *Ajua*. Interestingly, the *Ajua* game is common all over Sub-Sahara Africa, and this makes it ethnographically difficult in establishing who the original rock carvers were, and to also ascertain the entrenched conception that these indigenous people were non-Gusii. Apart from Goti Chaki area, soapstone rock art has also been found in other sites in Gusii including Bosinange, Nyabigena and Sameta region. However, unfortunately, due to lack of conservation initiatives, these unique pre-historic rock art carvings are rapidly being damaged and disappearing from the various historical sites in the Gusii region (Ong'esa, 2010)

Moreover, Gusii folk history asserts that the sculptures pre-date the arrival of the Gusii in their current homeland in South Western Kenya. In this regard, perhaps, it will be of historical significance if a comparative study is undertaken between the rock art in Gusii with those found in other parts of Africa such as Southern Tanzania, Zimbabwe, South Africa, the Nile Valley and parts of the Sahara Desert (Eisemon, et al., 1998). In particular, this could assist to ascertain whether such unique artwork spread from one area of the African Continent to another or whether it was developed independently by different people and at different periods (Akama, 2017).

Thus, it should be noted, that the Gusii soapstone industry was closely intertwined with the people's cultural practices and religious beliefs. In particular, some soapstone items were used in the performance of various cultural and/or religious activities (Ong'esa, 1971; 2011). These included soapstone containers that were used to store traditional medicines. Also, soapstone powder was used to decorate people who performed traditional rituals such as rain-making initiation, and burial ceremonies. For instance, Gusii traditional healers and/or diviners used to smear the soapstone powder on the hands and face of the person who had come to consult them in order to, figuratively, find out the forms of sickness the individual was suffering from (Ong'esa, 1971; Ochieng, 1974; Motondi, 2010).

Furthermore, according to Gusii folk culture, the unique rock art painting found on soapstone at Goti Chaki, Sameta and other sites in Tabaka had ritualistic value. It was a culturally held belief that carving or drawing specific animals such as antelopes, giraffes and other herbivorous species provided good omen to the hunters. Thus, written literature and gusii folk history indicates that one of the main uses of the soapstone among the Gusii during the pre-colonial period included making vessels to store traditional medicine, smoking pipes, bowls and soapstone powder among others (Ochieng, 1974; Motondi, 2010).

It can also be postulated that, one of the main factors that influenced the development of soapstone industry at Tabaka and the adjacent areas is the natural occurrence of a rich natural resource of soapstone. This is evident with the many quarries in the area. Particularly, the soapstone rich quarries of Nyabigena, Nyabigege and Moma are confined in the area of Tabaka where the rocks are partially covered. It is therefore possible that it was through trial and error or even by accident that the discovery of the soft stone was made. For instance, the uniqueness



and softness of the soapstone allowed inscriptions to be engraved on the stones. In this regard, it is no wonder that the earliest evidence on the use of soapstone was the inscriptions on the rocks that probably dates back to hundreds and perhaps thousands of years (Eisemon, et al., 1998). Furthermore, it is possible that soapstone products were traded during pre-colonial times, as the Gusii were known to engage in trade with the neighbouring communities. Items such as smoking pipes and storage containers were sold to the Luo, Abasuba and the Kuria in local markets such as Riosiri and Nyakoe.

Nevertheless, the idea of earning a living from soapstone carving alone did not exist until recent years. Soapstone was also used to make other items of utility such as bowls and pots, while bowls were used for eating and storing food, pots were used to store food, especially grains such as sorghum and finger millet and for milking livestock. The Gusii people also made four legged stools from soapstone that were majorly used in the homestead.

### **Access to Soapstone Raw Materials**

Consequently, the Gusii people in Tabaka had learnt the art of sculpting because the raw material was found in plenty, within their local environment. Initially, the stone was easily accessed because parts of the soapstone rocks appeared on the surface. It is no wonder that inscriptions of wild animals were easily and conveniently done on the surface of the stones, (fig.1). The soapstones were thus easily accessible until the top layer of the rock was exhausted prompting the community to start digging out the rock.

It should be noted that, in terms of accessibility, during the pre-colonial period, land was communally owned, and any member of the community could freely and easily access the stone, especially if they were clan members. As the case is with most other African communities, men were the custodians of land. They were the ones who handed down ancestral land from one generation to another. Women in the community would only access their husband's, father's or brother's land for use. Ancestral land was thus available to members of the same clan who could access it and utilize it (Akama & Maxon, 2006).

The people of Tabaka could freely access the quarries within their ancestral land such as Riamosioma, Bwonsase, Riontita, Nyabitono, Itumbe and Nyatike in the South Mugirango region in the current Kisii County. Members only looked for people to assist in digging out the stones over some beer in what was popularly known as "risaga" (Akama & Maxon, 2006:269). The various quarries were owned by different clans and one could only pay for the stones if they went to a quarry of another clan, may be looking for a different colour, quality or size of a stone. Carvers selected suitable stones on the basis of hardness, colour and size and, also in relation to the determined value of the item they intended to produce. Selection of stones was usually done through visual inspection, flaking and sounding of the stones using an iron machete to determine the strength of the stones.

Extraction of the stone involved hard work and was also time consuming. Energetic men first removed the overlying soil to expose the needed stone. The stone was then pried from the hillside using iron tools. The stone was cut out according to the required size and shape as well as transportation convenience. Sometimes the stones were roughly shaped into desired items at the quarry to reduce excess weight, and as a reminder of the intended purpose. Transportation of the stones from the quarries was done by women and young boys who carried them on their heads to adjacent workshops. Big and heavy stones were however carried by men (Ong'esa, 2011).

**Figure 1. Traditional utility items: smoking pipe, bowls and pots.**



**Source:** The Authors

### **Soapstone Industry during the Colonial period**

The introduction of mass-manufactured goods in Kenya during the colonial period, led to stiff competition to the locally produced items including soapstone products. In this regard, the arrival of European goods that came in bulk overshadowed traditional goods that were usually produced in limited quantities through small scale cottage industries. Thus, the unequal competition for existing markets between mass-manufactured European goods and small scale cottage industry products led to the stunting of the production of indigenous industrial items. However, notwithstanding, the fact that there was almost total collapse of indigenous industrial products in Kenya and other parts of Africa, the soapstone industry in Gusii has managed, over the years, to survive. In this regard, the key question is: What made the Gusii soapstone industry survive the onslaught of the introduction of mass production of Western products.

It should be noted that the pioneer European administrator and adventurer seekers who had the first encounter with the Gusii people at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century observed with bemusement and/or admiration, the uniqueness, dexterity, and the overall aesthetic value of the soapstone products (Eisemon et al, 1988; Motondi, 2010). Consequently, pioneer colonial administrator and European travellers to Gusii land made it a point of purchasing pieces of soapstone sculptures.

After World War II, the economy of most Western countries experienced rapid growth. Due to rapid economic expansion, increasing number of people in the Western world started having more disposable income (i.e., money remaining after being able to purchase basic needs such as food, shelter and paying school fees). Most of this discretionary income started to be used for various recreational activities including traveling outside one's home environment, which sometimes entail traveling to far off destinations in Africa and other parts of the Third World.

Furthermore, recent advancement in transportation and electronic technology, especially the advancement in aeroplane technology, has made it increasingly possible for large numbers of international travelers, particularly from Europe and North America, and recently South East Asia countries to efficiently and/or comfortably travel to long overhaul destinations such as Kenya. It is in these Third World tourist destinations that Western tourists and other travelers participate in various touristic activities away from the routine activities in the generally perceived tiresome home environment and/or place of work.

In this regard, rapid economic development accompanied with accelerated technological advancement in Western Europe and North America and other parts of the world has led to what is currently referred to international mass tourism, as millions of people travel to various destinations in different parts of the world to participate in diverse recreational activities. Thus,



international tourism is currently a major phenomenon in both developed and developing countries; generating billions if not trillions of dollars for both private and public investors.

### **Soapstone Industry during the Post-Colonial period**

In the post-colonial period, particularly from the late 1960s, tourism has become a major foreign exchange earner for Kenya and many other African countries, as a large numbers of international tourists travel to Africa to partake in various tourism and hospitality related activities. Consequently, in recent years, Kenya has become a leading tourist destination in Africa attracting more than 1.3 million persons per annum (Kenya Government, 2018). Furthermore, Kenya continues attracting more international tourists from Western countries and other parts of the world, especially the emerging economies such as China, Japan and other Southeast Asia countries, the so-called “Asian Tigers.”

However, it should be observed that as much as Western countries continue issuing travel advisory warnings to prospective tourists to Kenya, interestingly, most of the recent terrorist attacks do not specifically target international tourists, and; in fact it is mostly ordinary Kenyans who fall prey to these criminal attacks. Thus, extremely few Western tourists, if any, have become victims of these recent terrorist attacks in Kenya and other parts of the Third World.

In this regard, within this broader context of international mass tourism development, whenever international tourists visit Kenya, part of their itinerary is to visit places where unique indigenous pieces of art such as the Gusii soapstone products and other forms of indigenous handicraft are produced and/or sold. As already stated, while visiting these places to admire the aesthetic beauty of these indigenous soapstone products, the international tourism also end up purchasing these pieces of art which they take to their home countries. As stated earlier, most of these unique pieces of art are usually, conspicuously, displayed in living rooms, government and private business front offices and art museums.

In fact, it should be stated that currently there is no major city and/or major international art gallery, where one cannot find Gusii soapstone products being displayed. The soapstone products are being sold to readily available buyers who are eager to pay relatively higher prices for the soapstone pieces of art. In this regard, it is not uncommon for one to find a soapstone carving, such as wildlife sculpture carvings that were bought at a lowly price of say less than US\$ 2 at the point of origin in Gusii land, being sold as high as US\$ 100 by international business men and/or women in the Western cities who end up pocketing, unethically, huge profits (Akama, 2017).

An interesting phenomenon that has developed, in recent years due to increasing international demand for the Gusii soapstone products, is the evolving of a special group of elite Gusii artists such as Elkanah Ong’esa and Gerald Motondi. These elite Gusii soapstone artists engage in the production of high value pieces of art targeting specific clients and/or niche markets in the West and other parts of the world. They include tertiary educational institutions, international organizations such as the UNESCO, government agencies and business organizations, and international NGOs. In this regard, these elite Gusii artists have made a name for themselves internationally. In this regard, these uniquely crafted pieces of soapstone art are currently on display in various arts museums, government and private business offices, and international organizations front offices in different parts of the world, especially in America and Europe. For instance, Elkanah Ongesa’s special pieces of art, including “bird of peace” and “dancing birds” are in display at the UNESCO Head Office in Paris and USA Embassy in Nairobi, respectively.

However, notwithstanding the lucrative businesses of imported soapstone products in the West and other parts of the world, whenever one interacts with these well-known elite Gusii soapstone artists and engage them in in-depth conversation concerning the monetary benefit that they receive from their soapstone carvings, they are always very categorical that apart from token



payments or awards that are presented to them as signs of recognitions of their unique pieces of art, in most instances they do not receive monetary payments that are commensurate with the market prices of the soapstone products.

In this regard, it is a well-known fact that whenever these pieces of soapstone handicraft are sold in international markets and/or are auctioned in major arts gallery in the Western world, they fetch hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars, money which does not reach the Abagusii people who produce these unique pieces of art. It should therefore be enunciated that this is one of the major issues and/or challenges that is currently confronting the Gusii soapstone industry.

Moreover, in places where these pieces of unique soapstone art products are put on display in arts museums and other centres of art collections, many art lovers throng to these places and are willing to pay the requisite entry fees in order to have a glimpse and admire the specially crafted art products. These forms of entry fees payment to museum accumulates to millions of dollars. In recent years, visiting art museums has become an extremely lucrative business in the Western and other parts of the world.

### **Challenges Confronting the Soapstone Industry**

As already indicated, the soapstone industry especially after independence, in 1963, has been profoundly influenced by the impacts of tourism. However, it should be noted that, to a certain extent, the economic might of the tourist market has also had adverse influences on the soapstone handicraft. For instance, as has been widely discussed by various tourism researchers, the commercialization of handicrafts such as basketry weaving and soapstone art does stifle creativity, innovation and originality in favour of improving production for the tourism market (Courts, 1987, Kenya Government, 2018). In addition, the status of soapstone handicraft production as a cottage industry is affected, as production is shifted from the home and family towards more market oriented workshops.

Nevertheless, although these workshops are set up with the express purpose of generating income to fund education, healthcare and other social welfare programs, their impact on both creativity and on the social structure of soapstone production may be detrimental in the long run.

Consequently, the production of soapstone as a commercial enterprise requires a certain sacrifice of creativity and quality. Curio shop owners often provide samples of pieces that they would like the soapstone carvers to make. These results in a formulaic style of commercial art which mimics the mass production and almost eliminates traditional handicrafts production processes and structures that are more adaptive to the local conditions such as household utensils and ritualistic items that were used in rainmaking ceremony/dance. Consequently, the development of a variety of artistic themes is hindered due to the imitation of samples that are partly encouraged by the curio shops.

Also, as discussed elsewhere, another hurdle in the development of the soapstone industry was the introduction of mass produced goods (Motondi, 2010). Soapstone carvers used to produce items with functional utility, such as pots, bowls, smoking pipes, and snuff boxes among others. However, the growth of mass produced goods meant that soapstone carvers lost a significant market for their goods. Other handicrafts suffered in the same way, as plastic bags and containers became effective replacements for baskets and pots.

Since early 2000, the demand for soapstone carvings has risen astronomically in tandem with the growth of the Kenyan tourism industry. Although this is largely a positive development, it has negative aspects as well, including stifling competition in the local and international arena which has resulted in the demise of producer co-operatives as the main structures of the industry. Instead, they have been replaced by private companies. Some of these private companies are



owned by non-locals, which means that the profits earned by these companies do not directly benefit the local soapstone carvers. Moreover, the increase of private companies has led to compromised prices and the quality of items produced as the companies compete for market.

Although private companies enabled a few individuals to streamline their production models and to earn a lot of money, the drawback is that private companies offer greater opportunities for individuals to exploit large numbers of people in the community. This has occurred when the management of private companies takes advantage of the relative ignorance of local suppliers and employees to exploit them. This is done through misappropriation of profits, paying them poorly, and generally carrying on asymmetrical activities under the cloak of corporate status, which is less open to scrutiny than a co-operative organization.

The impact of middlemen has also been a continuous problem in the production and marketing of soapstone carvings since the colonial period. In recent years, it has become a common practice for middlemen to buy soapstone products cheaply from Gusii carvers, and then sell them at exorbitant prices in the national and international market. Although the quantity of soapstone being mined and carved is bigger than ever before, the “privatization” of the soapstone industry allow unscrupulous middlemen to have a field day, as they can easily manipulate the various soapstone producers, because they do not have a unified strategy on crucial issues such as the pricing and marketing of soapstone products. Many carvers confirm that the disintegration of the co-operatives and the creation of numerous private companies do have negative impact for the overall development of the soapstone industry.

Furthermore, after the collapse of the co-operatives, many soapstone carvers began moving to urban centres such as Nairobi, Nakuru and Mombasa to sell their carvings individually. Unfortunately, they had no marketing experience as previously, all marketing was done by the co-operatives. As such, the individual carvers were unable to effectively market their soapstone sculptures in the town settings since they lacked prior sales and marketing skills and knowledge. Middlemen capitalized on this situation, going to Tabaka in large numbers to buy soapstone at bargain prices. As a result of these factors, the general market price for soapstone has gone down in recent years. The problem of middlemen is exemplified by the experiences of Mr. Thomas Mogendi and the Tabaka Classic carvers, where Mr. Mogendi is a member. Tabaka Classic Carvers had a business partner named Peter Wahome, who was the proprietor of a firm called Crafts of Africa. Wahome introduced the Tabaka Classic Carvers to the proprietor of Crafts Village UK where they sold their carvings. The Crafts Village, UK made payment through Wahome who later sent the amount to the carvers.

Differences arose between Wahome and Crafts Village, UK over the pricing, as the proprietor of Crafts Village, UK felt that too much of the sale price was going to Wahome, instead of the carvers. The owner of Crafts Village, UK had previously visited Tabaka, accompanied by Mr. Wahome.

Therefore, he wrote to Tabaka Classic Carvers and an agreement was signed between Crafts Village, UK and Tabaka Classic Carvers, in which Tabaka Classic Carvers would only sell directly to Crafts Village, UK, and Crafts Village, UK would buy directly from Tabaka Classic Carvers. This removed Mr. Wahome from the picture, as he had turned out to be just another middleman. Mr. Thomas Mogendi says that as a result, the prices for their carvings began to improve. The buyers abroad work with fair trade organizations that ensure that the original producers of goods are not exploited and that local people’s sustainable development is accounted for. Crafts Village, UK pays them a minimum of Kshs. 500 for each carving. In addition, they send representatives to Tabaka to check on quality.

These UK business envoys pay them and then transport the carvings to the UK. The copyright of Tabaka Classic Carvers is also protected under their agreement with Crafts Village, UK. Unfortunately, the agreement entered into by Tabaka Classic Carvers in 2006 was drafted without



legal advice, and it failed to give due consideration to probable inflation and royalties. This is because the agreement was drafted by the company and Tabaka Classic Carvers merely signed it.

In this regard, it should be noted that although the partnership is still on it has not been revised as per current socio-economic changes. Whereas the adoption of formal, legally binding agreements between carvers and buyers is a step in the right direction for the organization of the soapstone industry, there is a need for local carvers to protect their interests by seeking legal representation whenever they enter into a formal agreement with foreign producers.

### **Way Forward**

Thus, based on the various issues and challenges confronting the Gusii soapstone industry, one of the critical question that can be asked is: What specific strategies and policy initiatives can be put in place to enhance the socio-cultural value and economic benefits that reach the Gusii soapstone producers?

In the overall, notwithstanding the various problems and challenges confronting the industry such as lack of appropriate technology, leadership wrangles, exploitation by middlemen, gender bias, environmental degradation, lack of modern marketing strategies and the recent spread of HIV-AIDS among soapstone carvers, this research contends that the future of the soapstone industry is relatively bright if a number of appropriate measures and strategies are initiated for long-term sustainability of the Gusii Soapstone Industry.

### **Policy Related Recommendations**

- i. Establishment of entrepreneurial centers for the training and development of soapstone industry artisans. These centers will help train and develop the artisans on how to design, produce and market soapstone products. The centres should also provide basic skills on book-keeping and financial management techniques. These should be aimed at empowering the soapstone carvers on how to manage their income and other financial returns, and also be able to keep proper books of account. The dissemination of marketing skills to the local carvers will enable them identify existing market niche as well as local and international demands of their products. The training centres can also empower soapstone carvers with basic skills on internet sales and marketing and ways to use their mobile phones to reach the broader international market. Furthermore, they should also be trained to be able to use basic computer design skills to produce products for specific markets.
- ii. There is also need for an improved transportation and communication network in the area. Soapstone is a major foreign exchange earner for the country. There is therefore need to have such a productive area accessible to both local and international traders and tourists through the improvement of transportation infrastructure such as roads. Also, the nearby Suneka Airstrip should be improved to allow easy and efficient access to the Tabaka area and the adjacent region in South-Western Kenya
- iii. There is also need for the government to support this industry that is a major foreign exchange earner. The government should support the producers by providing them with modern tools of work as well as a robust tertiary level education that will boost the quality of soapstone production. For instance, Hany Faisal who is a renowned art scholar in Egypt contends that the lack of modern equipment limits Kenyan carvers to small sized carving that generate little income. "In Egypt, the use of advanced technology helps artists to come up with big valuable sculptures" (nation newspaper 29/Aug/2011:19)
- iv. Soapstone producers in Gusii should organize themselves into a strong co-operative society. The initiative has already been taken by the Kisii Soapstone Carvers Co-



- operative Society (KSCCS). An effort should be made to ensure that all soapstone carvers, including those who are just joining the industry become members of the co-operative. In this way, soapstone carvers will be able to negotiate better prices for their products, and eliminate the possibility of individual carvers undercutting the rest, which is detrimental to all soapstone carvers in the long run.
- v. The Kisii Soapstone Carvers Co-operative Society (KSCCS), in collaboration with the government, should make its presence felt in the international market, through trade fairs and advertising. Currently, soapstone producers are competing with each other for the limited number of tourists who come to the country. A few producers cater exclusively to the local market. Both the tourist and local markets may not generate sufficient demand to exhaust the available supply. Thus, by directly exporting to foreign markets, as opposed to waiting for tourists to come to Tabaka, the market will expand and demand will increase. Since Kenya has recently been vulnerable to travel, advisories by Western governments which warn their citizens against coming to Kenya, due to perceived increased terrorist acts, the option of direct marketing of soapstone abroad will circumvent political development at home and abroad.
  - vi. It is also important for the relevant government departments, such as Trade and Industry, as well as Cultural and Social Services, and Tourism, to conduct exhibition locally to promote awareness of the variety of soapstone sculptures being produced in Gusii. This would emulate the efforts of the Canadian soapstone carvers, who set up an office in a big city to promote their work. Such an arrangement will increase the opportunities for soapstone sculptors to be invited to exhibitions abroad. Just as there has been a campaign to promote local tourism, a similar campaign for local arts and craft, including soapstone, could have positive effect for soapstone carvers.
  - vii. Last but not least, there is need for the enactment of draft policy and clear legal framework to protect the soapstone carvers from blatant exploitation by unscrupulous middlemen, private businessmen and investors. This policies and laws should be particularly drafted with the main aim of protecting the social, economic and cultural interests, innovativeness and creativity of the soapstone carvers and their sustainability. Specifically, there should be a clear legal framework to protect the copyrights and patents of the unique carvings from blatant infringement in the production, marketing and sales rights of the local people.

## Conclusion

The study provides a systematic analysis of the economic development and historical evolution of the soapstone industry in the Tabaka area. The research establishes that during the pre-colonial period, the people of Tabaka produced soapstone items such as bowls, pots, stools, clubs, smoking pipes that had utility value and enhanced their livelihood. The people exchanged these utility items with their neighbours in South-Western Kenya including the Luo, Kuria and Suba and in return, they received other forms of utility items such as hoes, machetes, salt, beef and milk. The study shows that during the colonial period, there were major changes in the production and marketing of soapstone products as a result of introduction of Western goods that were mass-produced and served various purposes. The mass produced goods included steel products and plastic goods that replaced the soapstone products.

These live changes brought major transformation in the production of soapstone products. Particularly, there was transformation from the production of soapstone items that had utility value to the production of non-utility artistic items that were mainly sold to foreigners as artistic products that mainly served aesthetic and amusement value. The non-utility soapstone items included carvings of wild animals, human imitations and other artistic items that represented various forms



of nature and other forms of abstract art that suited the interests and aesthetic values of the Western world.

However, during the colonial period, the soapstone industry did not experience much development due to colonial policies that discouraged the production and development of indigenous industries in order to minimize competition to the mass produced goods that were being imported from Britain and other European Countries. The colonial policies mainly supported the importation of Western goods and services. Furthermore, colonial policies were aimed at encouraging the production of agricultural crops and other forms of raw materials for Western industries, whereas; the local people of Tabaka, as is the case with other parts of Africa, provided markets for European mass-produced goods.

In the post-colonial period, from the 1960s to the present, there has been gradual change of government policies that have direct impact on the soapstone industry. For instance, the restrictions, such as the stoppage of the production, promotion and marketing of soapstone items that were imposed by the colonial government in local production were done away with. This provided individual freedom and encouraged the production and marketing of soapstone production. Particularly, there was increased production and marketing of artistic carvings as the Kenyan tourism industry expanded in recent years. Furthermore, the government encouraged the exportation of soapstone carvings to the outside world especially to Europe and North America. In this regard, in recent years, external market forces and processes of globalization have had major influence on the Tabaka soapstone industry, particularly in the forms of artistic items that are specifically produced to suit the needs and expectations of the rapidly changing globalized world market including increasing demands of artistic products by both domestic and international tourists.

For instance, due to extreme competition from Chinese and other Asian products such as plastic toys and internal household decorations that have flooded the local and international market, the soapstone producers have started producing new items that are appropriate to existing market demands such as the production of items that are lighter and smaller in size including items such as small-sized animal carvings, abstract sculptures and decorative items. The soapstone carvers have also adapted unique forms and designs that appeal to different market needs. Furthermore, due to the changing market demands and increased competition, the people of Tabaka have formed co-operatives that are promoting group production and marketing of soapstone goods. Also, the local people have adapted modern skills of marketing their goods in different parts of the world through internet and other forms of electronic technologies such as electronic communication and money transfer.

The study has clearly demonstrated that a critical feature of the soapstone industry is the local people's resilience in the development of the industry as a sustainable form of livelihood capable of withstanding internal and external challenges. Thus, the industry has over the years managed to survive and adapt to changing conditions and demands due to the uniqueness of the soapstone products and the adaptive skills and innovations of the local people that responded to changing socio-economic and cultural needs. As a consequence, unlike other forms of indigenous industries that were unable to withstand forces of colonialism and Western capitalism, the soapstone industry still flourishes and has great potential in making a significant contribution in the promotion of sustainable livelihood of the local people.

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