

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

People and Production in Late Precolonial Tanzania: History and Structures, by Juani Koponen

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7gk2695z>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 18(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Ahimed, Christine Choi

Publication Date

1990

DOI

10.5070/F7182016833

Copyright Information

Copyright 1990 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Juhani Koponen. *People and Production in Late Precolonial Tanzania: History and Structures*. Finnish Society for Development Studies, Finnish Anthropological Society, Finnish Historical Society in cooperation with Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Finland, 1988. 434 pages.

People and Production in Late Precolonial Tanzania: History and Structures weaves a fine line between the "primitive Africa" of John Iliffe's *A Modern History of Tanganyika* and the "merrie Africa" of Helge Kjekshus' *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History: The Case of Tanganyika, 1850-1950*. The attempt to take a safe, middle road is apparent in this comprehensive study of the geographical area that is today Tanzania. All the major issues in pre-colonial African history are discussed: from environmental factors to kinship relations, modes of production to aspects of reproduction, raising few if any innovative or controversial ideas. Consistent with the conservative approach, this book, while an excellent updated survey of the written sources on pre-colonial Tanzania, offers no primary research or an alternative to the conventional studies of pre-colonial East Africa. The author employs an exhaustive compilation of ethnographic and historical documents of the area, yet underutilizes recent historical linguistic and archaeological analysis.

The greatest strength of this study is that it adds detail and breadth to the argument that significant changes occurred in East Africa during the nineteenth century prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Koponen first examines endogenous development wherein Africans in the area developed with the variety of ethnic identities and economies to match the variety of ecosystems. But in the nineteenth century long-distance trade and the incorporation of the region into the Indian Ocean trade network intensified the forces of endogenous change and created many societies in flux at the time of the colonial arrival.

An example of the cautious tone of this study is Koponen's approach to the Ngoni. He classifies the Ngoni migration/invasion as an exogenous factor in nineteenth-century Tanzanian history, but consistent with the cautious tone of the study, he admits that the Ngoni migration/invasion was not the massive military onslaught previously thought. He critiques the traditional view of the Ngoni and even concedes that many indigenous Tanzanians were peacefully incorporated into the Ngoni ethnicity during their move through the area, but never offers any innovative ideas on the nature or cause of their migration/invasion.

Koponen ventures away from safe pre-colonial historiography in the section entitled "Ethnicity: the fall of the tribal model." The ease with which people were able to move from one ethnicity to another in

pre-colonial Tanzania clearly contradicts the old model of ethnically uniform tribes ruled by chiefs. Koponen instead sees ethnic divisions as fluid, often changing with an intermingling of people. Therefore the only consistent ethnic category effective in describing pre-colonial Tanzania is that of language-production groups. This form of classification is especially important when studying North Central Tanzania, one of the most culturally diverse regions in Africa, where three of the main African language families are represented and all the majors forms of African production are found.

Some Africans expressed it more symbolically. It was for men to kill, an old Pangwa woman told a researcher, to kill not only animals but trees too, i.e., to clear, whereas it was for women to bring up life, i.e., to plant. (p.282)

The above quote describes the division of labor discussed in this study. The author aptly describes the work of each sex in pre-colonial Tanzania, but like much of the book, the descriptions are static and the changes in the gender-specific division of labor that occurred in the nineteenth century is ignored.

In the introduction, the author writes that the purpose of the study "is to provide such a working model of Tanzania on the eve of colonialization and thus offer a basis for a discussion on the impact of colonialism on Tanzanian development." Yet the omission of some of the important issues concerning the role of female labor and accumulation through control of female labor in pre-colonial Tanzania raises significant questions about the accuracy of this model. In the sections on kinship, internal slave trade and production, the latest works by feminist historians and anthropologists have been ignored. Koponen admits that kinship "loomed large in pre-colonial social and political organization," yet he does not discuss the different modes of production and the relationship between societies organized along matrilineal or patrilineal lines.

As a general survey of the accepted historiography of pre-colonial Tanzania this is an excellent book and could serve as a cornerstone for the more creative and insightful work that still remains to be done in pre-colonial East African history.

Christine Choi Ahmed